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JOHN ADAMS AND THE BALANCE

Zebulun Q. Weeks

I will open my mouth in a parable:

I will utter dark sayings of old.

—Psalms 78:2

*H*owl, Snarl, bite, Ye Calvinistick! Ye Athanasian Divines, if You will. Ye will say, I am no Christian: I say Ye are no Christians: and there the Account is balanced. Yet I believe all the honest men among you, are Christians in my Sense of the Word.”¹ Although John Adams saw no place for the trinity in religion, in

¹ *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 374. “It is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three; and yet the one is not three, and the

government “they ought to have united the executive power, and divided the legislative, and by that means have produced that trinity in unity, which is neither a contradiction nor a mystery, but is alone efficacious to curb the audacity of individuals, and the daring turbulence of parties.”² Unity comes in threes: unity of education in the *trilinguis vir*; unity of knowledge from “art, science, and literature, which we owe to Greece, Italy and Palestine, countries which have been, and are our masters in all things” (*Defence*, 2:445); unity in the family among the man, woman and child; unity in the state among the three orders of men (the one, the few, the many), “this great truth, this eternal principle” (*Defence*, 2:242). The three orders must be made one in purpose, but their union requires, paradoxically, a separation, a balancing, of roles and of powers. Adams cannot accept the Athanasian creed because he cannot imagine it, “for I suppose belief to be the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition” (*Letters*, 368). In religion, government, and life, what to him made sense was the metaphor of the balance—it unified the trinity.

Metaphor, as it is the most frequent, so is by far the most beautiful of the figures.³ Among the ancient grammarians and rhetoricians the many definitions of metaphor—and of its extended form, allegory—have in common the notion of moving a meaning from its original place to another, unexpected place. This movement, expressed by the very terms for the figure (*metaphora*, *translatio*), was classified into various systems, for example a fourfold system founded upon the possible combinations

three are not one: to divide mankind by a single letter into homoousians and homoiousians” (368).

² John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America: Against the Attack of M. Turgot in His Letter to Dr. Price*, 3d ed. (1797), 3 vols. (Union, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, 2001), 2:422.

³ Quintilian 8.6.4: “Incipiamus igitur ab eo qui cum frequentissimus est tum longe pulcherrimus, translatione dico, quae *metaphora* Graece vocatur. Quae quidem cum ita est ab ipsa nobis concessa natura ut indocti quoque ac non sentientes ea frequenter utantur, tum ita iucunda atque nitida ut in oratione quamlibet clara proprio tamen lumine eluceat.” On ancient sources for metaphor and allegory, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson (Leiden, 1998), sections 558–64, 893–901; also G. R. Boys-Stones, ed., *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially 7–27; D. Innes, “Metaphor, Simile, and Allegory as Ornaments of Style.” Many of the instances of metaphor discussed below would be classified as allegory, but the former term is often preferred, even for a figure of many words, and among the ancients themselves use of the terms is unstable.

of animate and inanimate things.⁴ Metaphor is used for two reasons.⁵ The first is necessity. We need a word for the stage of a fight in which, after preliminary feints and punches, two fighters come to grips and grapple, until one is on the ground or runs away. So a speaker in Plutarch derives *wrestling* (*pale*) from the word for palm (*paliste*), because the palm of the hand is that part of the wrestler by which he accomplishes the work of his art.⁶ The second purpose is to confer distinction, distinction upon the speaker for having thought of it and upon the hearer for having perceived it. Invention and recognition are pleasurable for both.⁷ Metaphors at once clarify, please, are exotic.⁸ The difficulty is delightful: "Of course! But I never would have thought of it" (*Rhet.* 1412a).

Newton's third law of motion, "to every Action there is always opposed an equal reaction," claims to be a principle of nature. It is also an axiom, the form of which is itself persuasive. The principle: "opposition in all things."⁹ What is noble opposes baseness. Principles act through axioms; they also act through metaphors. Metaphors are active; they work, they do; they place before our eyes the one acting—*energeia* (*Rhet.* 1411b23–28). The metaphor of the balance occurs five times in the *Iliad*; Theognis deploys it readily (157–58); it is found throughout the Bible, and has done good business in later literatures.¹⁰ What does Homer place

⁴ For example, Tryphon, *On Tropes* 191.12 and 3.207.18, where the text supplies the classification of metaphor by animate and inanimate comparisons, with examples of each.

⁵ Cicero *De Oratore* 3.155: "necessitas genuit inopia coacta et angustiis, post autem delectatio iucunditasque celebravit;" Quintilian, 8.6.6: "id facimus aut quia necesse est aut quia significantius est aut, ut dixi quia decentius."

⁶ This is one of several etymologies offered in the *Quaestiones convivales* (*Moralia* 638a–640a).

⁷ Cicero believes metaphor gives such great pleasure because it marks cleverness, leads the hearers' thoughts to something else but not astray, expresses the whole thought in one word, and strikes the senses, especially vision, so forcibly. "Id accidere credo, vel quod ingeni specimen est quoddam transilire ante pedes posita et alia longe repetita sumere; vel quod is, qui audit, alio ducitur cogitatione neque tamen aberrat, quae maxima est delectatio; vel quod in singulis verbis res ac totum simile conficitur; vel quod omnis translatio, quae quidem sumptu ratione est, ad sensus ipsos admovetur, maxime oculorum, qui est sensus acerrimus" (*De orat.* 3.160).

⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1405a.

⁹ *Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 2:11. Antithesis conveys the new idea better, brevity faster. See also Theognis 35–36, and *Rhet.* 1412b.

¹⁰ E.g., Vergil *Aeneid* 12.725–27: "Iuppiter ipse duas aequato examine lances / sustinet et fata imponit diversa duorum, / vem damnet labor et quo vergat pondere letum"; "Jove sets the beam; in either scale he lays / The champions' fate, and each exactly weighs. / On this side, life

in opposition? At 8.69-77 it is the Trojans and the Achaeans, at 22.208-13 Hector and Achilles. Who holds the balance? Zeus. But does Zeus tip the scale? When weighing the fates of doom (*keres*), Zeus drags up the balance, weighs the result, sends a sign from heaven (fear) upon those whose pan descended (8.69-77). Likewise, weighing the fates of Hector and Achilles, Zeus places the fates into the pans, lifts the balance, measures the pan and—obeys? For metaphors are dangerous. They die, or they deceive. If led too far away from the object,¹¹ if too strange, or, contrarily, seen too often, made familiar, a metaphor is dead to our senses: we perceive the comparison but no longer see the object. If they are “poetic devices” or “symbolic demonstrations,” are they the less real?¹² Homer believed the scales to be no poetic device, no metaphor; for him they were real. This, at least, was Plutarch’s judgment. Warning the young against the deliberate fictions of the poets, he condemned, too, what the poets deemed real, he false. “Such things are those that poets fabricate willingly; more numerous are the things that they do not fabricate but themselves, supposing and believing them to be true, infect us with their falsehood.” Plutarch cited Zeus and his scales.¹³ Metaphors are dangerous, even if candidly meant. The choice of the verb *prosanachronuntai*—meaning “to communicate by contact,” by extension to change color (especially with cosmetics), to look to the outside only, and with regard to language, to ornament or embellish needlessly—supported Plutarch’s charge that Homer’s scales had altered our perception of the gods, their nature, and gave only an outer, and therefore false, picture, of which the metaphor is the beautiful clothing or ornament, whereby we more easily are taken in.

What happens when the judge is not just and fair as Zeus? Livy

and lucky chance ascends; / Loaded with death, that other scale descends” (trans. John Dryden [12.1054-57]); John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.990-1004; Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 5.71-74. This tradition was well known to Adams.

¹¹ “Videndum est ne longe simile sit ductum” (*De oratore*, 3.163).

¹² *Iliad* 22.208-13. “The golden scales are a façon de parler, a poetic device, to raise the tension at a critical moment in the narrative by appearing to create a momentary doubt regarding the outcome of an event which always firmly remains in the control of Zeus” (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* under the word *fate*). “The purpose of the image is a symbolic demonstration; Zeus is not discovering what is fated (for he already knows), nor does he cause Hector’s fate to sink” (M. M. Willcock ed. [London: Bristol Classical Press, 1978] note in the same place). Can Zeus be in control if he cannot “cause Hector’s fate to sink”?

¹³ Citing *Iliad* 22.210-13. “Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat,” in *Moralia* 16f4-17a11.

and Plutarch tell the story of Brennus the Gaul and the decision of the Senate to buy off the besiegers with money. When the Roman tribune complained about the unequal weights, *ponderainiqua*, Brennus threw his sword onto the weights and said, "Woe to the conquered," *vae victis* (Livy 5.49). The weights tampered with at the start, are made heavier by the sword's weight, and the Romans' payment increased correspondingly, for the balance had to be made equal. Plutarch agrees with Livy that the Celts fiddled with the weights in secret, then in the open they lifted up the balance and turned or twisted the balance.¹⁴ Zeus also may "incline" the balance.¹⁵ God enjoins, "Thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left" (Deut. 17:11, 5:32). Longer life is the reward for obedience to this commandment. "But thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Deut. 15:15). To maintain the middle state is to obey the commandment; obedience will prolong their days. The image of the balance in the Bible often refers to the last days of a man, the length of his life; it refers often to the final judgment. (In a dream the emperor Vespasian saw himself and his two sons in one pan, and Claudius and Nero in the other. He interpreted it correctly as signifying that the length of time he and his sons would rule would be equal to that of Claudius and Nero [Suetonius, *Divus Vespasianus* 8.25]). God weighs men against integrity (Job 31:6), against vanity (Psalm 62:9); he weighs grief and calamity (Job 6:2-3), actions and ways of men (Isaiah 2:3, 26:7; Proverbs 16:2), and he weighs kings and kingdoms in the balance and they are "found wanting" (Daniel 5:26-28).¹⁶

How did a balance work in antiquity? Much as a man even now lays a yoke on his shoulders and strives to balance the load on either end, it can be surmised that thus the beam of a balance came to be called a yoke, *zugon*: there was also the *stathmos*, or pan (two of them), and the *mess*,

¹⁴ *Camillus* 28.3-5.

¹⁵ Ar 19.223-24 Zeus inclines the balance. This seems to be the only occurrence where Zeus physically manipulates the decision of the scales, and even then only in the opinion of Odysseus, who is speaking.

¹⁶ Daniel interprets the writing on the wall for the Babylonian king Belshazzar. The interpretation says that Belshazzar has been weighed and found wanting (he is too light), and the kingdom is divided, like the two pans of the balance, and given to the Medes and Persians.

or middle part which is grasped by the one holding up the balance.¹⁷ The pans seemed to have been filled while lying on the ground, then hefted and measured against each other.¹⁸ In one pan lay the weights, a “just measure,” in the other, the object being weighed. Our word balance comes from the Latin *bis* and *lanx*, or “a plate twice over”—stressing that each plate is identical. Similarly a yoke was used to join two draft animals, hence bringing two opposing bodies together as one, to harness their energy for a determined purpose. This team of yoked oxen or mules could go in no certain direction without a guide and this guide was effected by means of the pole, the *messa* of which Zeus grabs hold when he hefts the balance.¹⁹ So whether as part of the balance, or whether as part of the wagon, the *messa* is the instrument of moderation, of the middle way.

The balance requires a hand to hold the middle of the balance, and a hand to make steady the balance, or to even out the weight of the pans. It must be a strong, a practiced, an honest, a precise hand. Precision stands at the center of the simile comparing the equipoise of the balance achieved by the working woman to the exact, immovable tension of the Achaean and Trojan battle lines struggling together.²⁰ To steady the balance is to apply a “check,” from the Arabic *shāh*, “king.” Hence *shāh mat*, our “check mate,” the “king is dead.” For “check quickly came to mean a reverse or defeat of the foe, then “a sudden arrest given to the career or onward course of anything” (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] 2, 5). To remember the original meaning of check is to remember the role of the king in holding the balance and in making the pans equal. “A just weight and balance are the Lord’s: all the weights of the bag are his work.” The king who deals wickedly with these weights is condemned (Prov. 16:11–12). If he distorts

¹⁷ One of the earliest pictures we have of the scale can be found on a Hittite relief in which a man supports the middle of the beam (clearly marked) from underneath. See Bruno Kisch, *Scales and Weights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 29 (Figure 3).

¹⁸ At *Iliad* 12.432–38, a working woman places wool in the scale, then lifts it high to balance it. It must be assumed that she filled the pans while they were lying on the ground.

¹⁹ Similarly, the Latin *statera* signifies a steelyard, a balance, and the pole of a chariot.

²⁰ *Iliad* 12.432–38. “This comparison is excellent on account of its justness; for there is nothing better represents an exact equality than a balance: but *Homer* was particularly exact, in having neither describ’d a woman of wealth and condition, for such a one is never very exact, not valuing a small inequality; nor a slave, for such a one is ever regardless of his master’s interest: but he speaks of a poor woman that gains her livelihood by her labour, who is at the same time just and honest; for she will neither defraud others, nor be defrauded her self” (Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Steven Shankman [London: Penguin Books, 1996], 590–91).

the balance he deals unjustly, if he changes the weight, and makes it lighter or heavier on either side he deals falsely, he uses "divers weights . . . and a false balance" (Prov. 20:23).

Zeus grasps the mean, the *mesa*. But the mean can only be found by balancing opposing extremes. Though a middle state grasped by Zeus be desirable and ideal, desirable and necessary is opposition. So Sallust credits Rome's power and goodness in part to *metus hostilis*. Opposition removed, Rome fell of her own weight.

Thomas Jefferson is more skeptical. "There are, I acknowledge, even in the happiest life, some terrible convulsions, heavy set-offs against the *opposite page of the account*. I have often wondered for what good end the sensations of Grief could be intended. All our other passions, within proper bounds, have an useful object. And the perfection of the moral character is, not in a Stoical apathy, so hypocritically vaunted, and so untrue too, because impossible, but in a *just equilibrium* of all the passions." (The balance in "just equilibrium," joins with the accounting metaphor, "opposite page of the account.") For John Adams, the balance to be sought, the "just equilibrium of all the passions" that Jefferson seeks, is possible only through grief. "We poor Mortals have nothing to do with it," Adams responds, "but to fabricate all the good We can out of all inevitable Evils." What are the uses of grief? "Grief compels the India Merchant to think; to reflect upon the plan of his Voyage. . . . The desolated Lover and disappointed Connections, are compelled by their Grief to reflect on the Vanity of human Wishes and expectations; to learn the essential Lesson of Resignation; to review their own Conduct towards the deceased; to correct any Errors or faults in their future Conduct towards their remaining friends and towards all Men; to recollect the Virtues of the lost Friend and resolve to imitate them. Grief drives Men into habits of serious Reflection sharpens the Understanding and softens the heart; it compels them to arouse their Reason, to assert its Empire over their Passions Propensities and Prejudices; to elevate them to a Superiority over all human Events; to give them the *Felicitas Animi immotam tranquillitatem* [the imperturbable tranquility of a happy heart]; in short to make them Stoicks and Christians." (Letters, 467 [italics mine], 473)

Aristocracy got Adams into trouble. He was attacked, maligned, libeled even, for his insistence that aristocracy existed in America, let alone for what his enemies judged to be approbation, even veneration. But there

could be for Adams no discreet avoidance of the concept. Aristocracy, like grief, will perfect the citizens—will make us “Stoicks and Christians.” “I can never too often repeat,” Adams insists, “that aristocracy is the monster to be chained; yet so chained as not to be hurt, for he is a most useful and necessary animal in his place. Nothing can be done without him.”²¹ Aristocracy is a great fortification which must be subdued “by regular approaches by a regular siege, and strong fortifications.” Taking this strong place, we must control, not eradicate it, for it is “wrought into the Fabrick of the Universe.” It rests upon five pillars: beauty, wealth, birth, genius, and virtues, although Adams complained that the first three outshone the last two.²² Aristocracy is to be captured by siegecraft, but not aggressively by ballistae or catapults or ladders; rather, by *equal* and *opposite* trenches and fortifications to withstand and intimidate the opposing power of aristocracy. It is a war that we must not lose, but we do not want to win, for in winning it we are left no enemy and that most dangerous of enemies, ourselves, has free rein.²³

The temple at Delphi bore two axioms: “Know thyself,” and “Nothing too Much.” Adams looks to true causes, he looks within, he seeks to know himself, and through himself, human nature and his country. Through this comes historical understanding.²⁴ “What do We Mean

²¹ *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1966), 189. See also *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 370: “The great secret of liberty is to find the means to limit [the aristocrats’] power and control their passions.”

²² “Any one of the three first, can at any time bear any one or both of the two last,” and, “Beauty, Grace, Figure, Attitude, Movement, have in innumerable Instances prevailed over Wealth, Birth, Talents Virtues and every thing else, in Men of the highest rank, greatest Power, and sometimes, the most exalted Genius, greatest Fame, and highest Merit” (*Letters*, 365, 371-72). Adams quotes Theognis, an early and appropriate aristocrat, and then translates: “Nor does a Woman disdain to be the Wife of a bad rich Man. But she prefers a Man of Property before a good Man. For Riches are honoured; and a good Man marries from a bad Family; and a bad Man from a good one. Wealth mingles all races” (370-71).

²³ “Yet is every man his greatest enemy, and, as it were, his owne executioner” (Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, 2.4, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], 73).

²⁴ The French revolution had ignored this understanding by ignoring the lessons of its past. “You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you. You set up your trade without a capital. If the last generations of your country appeared without much luster in your eyes, you might have passed them by and derived your claims from a more early race of ancestors. Under a pious predilection for those ancestors, your imaginations would

by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington" (*Letters*, 455). His *Defence of the Constitutions* arose out of his conviction that Turgot's support of a unicameral legislature as found in Pennsylvania, had exposed Turgot's ignorance of human nature. Reasoning from a false premise (that there is no class structure in America), Turgot had concluded that American government need not represent a class which did not exist: one assembly, representative of the whole people, would suffice to represent all of their interests. This theory of Turgot was in keeping with the "unnatural irrational and impracticable" notions of the French revolution.²⁵ To Adams nobility was natural, although encased within unnatural systems in Europe. America, in the minds of Turgot, Rousseau, and many Europeans and Americans, was to be the "Novus Ordo Saeclorum"; it was to break this unnatural system of man. Equality was at last to be achieved. But, paradoxically, where equality is enforced, equality is upset and liberty lost (*Defence*, 3:356). In Spenser's *Fairie Queen* a giant stands before the masses. His hand holds a balance. He boasts that he will bring equality into the world, take from the rich and give to the poor. "Were it not good that wrong were then surceast, / and from the most, that some were given to the least?" He will weigh out the measures of things and reorder the universe. Upon this scene has come Artegall, a pupil of

have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; and you would have risen with the example to whose imitation you aspired. Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves." Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36.

²⁵ "The first time, that you and I differed in Opinion on any material Question; was after your Arrival from Europe; and that point was the french Revolution. You was well persuaded in your own mind that the Nation would succeed in establishing a free Republican Government: I was as well persuaded, in mine, that a project of such a Government, over five and twenty millions people, when four and twenty millions and five hundred thousands of them could neither write nor read: was unnatural irrational and impracticable; as it would be over the Elephants Lions Tigers Panthers Wolves and Bears in the Royal Menagerie, at Versailles. . . . The Greeks in their Allegorical Style said that the two Ladies Aristokratia and Democratia, always in a quarrel, disturbed every neighbourhood with their brawls. It is a fine Observation of yours that 'Whig and TORY belong to Natural History.' Inequalities of Mind and Body are so established by God Almighty in his constitution of Human Nature that no Art or policy can ever plain them down to a Level."

Astraea, goddess of justice, whose scales are the best known feature of her iconography.²⁶ "All change is perilous," Artegaill exclaims, "and all chaunce unsound" (5.2.36). Nevertheless, the giant attempts to weigh things, but they slide off his scale; he tries to weigh words, but they fly out; he tries to weigh the sea, the air, but cannot. "But right sate in the midst of the beam alone" (5.2.48). The balance does no evil, from the Middle English *uvel*, "up, over,"—it does not go above, or beyond, it does not exceed the mark. Spenser's giant, being "evil," seeks extremities, "[f]or of the meane he greatly did misleeke" (5.2.49). For Adams, Turgot was attempting, like the giant of Spenser, to reorder the universe.

If hypocrisy, or ignorance, leads a legislator to take no account of aristocracy, aristocracy will come in at the window. "Without three orders, and an effectual balance between them, in every American constitution, [a government] must be destined to frequent unavoidable revolutions: if they are delayed a few years, they must come, in time" (*Defence*, 1:vii). *Aristoi*, who by masking themselves, mask their ambitions under popular words such as "equality," "democracy," must be especially guarded against.

The metaphor of a balance was current in the American colonies at the outbreak of the war.²⁷ So the Charlestonian David Ramsay in 1789:

²⁶ Astraea,

Return'd to heaven, whence she deriv'd her race;
Where she hath now an everlasting place,
Mongst those twelve signes, which nightly we doe see
The heavens bright-shining baudricke to enchace;
And is the Virgin, sixt in her degree,
And next her selfe her righteous balance hanging bee. (5.1.11)

²⁷ There is a great body of literature, begun by Woodrow Wilson, which claims that the metaphor of the balance, as used by the founders, stemmed from Newtonian physics. The word *counterpoise*, prominent in the *Federalist Papers*, is one of the words used to show that the authors were thinking of centripetal and centrifugal forces, planetary equipoise. See James A. Robinson, "Newtonianism and the Constitution," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 1 (1957): 252-66; Richard Striner, "Political Newtonianism: The Cosmic Model of Politics in Europe and America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (1995): 583-608; Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961); John R. Howe Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). Michael Foley, *Laws, Men and Machines: Modern American Government and the Appeal of Newtonian Mechanics* (London: Routledge, 1990), argues that the Founders were not thinking of Newtonian physics, but that balance of power is derived from the image of the balance in antiquity; I. Bernard Cohen, *Science and the Founding Fathers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) also argues against the influence of Newtonian physics.

America's "probable future greatness, when without a rival, and with a growing vent for her manufacturers, and increasing employment for her marine, threatened to destroy that balance of power, which European sovereigns have for a long time endeavoured to preserve."²⁸ "Balance" was coupled with "power," in English, first in 1579 (*OED*, s.v. *balance*, def. 11). In 1677 begins the commonplace, "balance of power," between countries in Europe (*OED*, def. 13). In conversation with a Dutchman at Bordeaux who remarked that England was "the most important Weight in the Ballance of Power in Europe against France," John Adams replied, "that I had been educated from my Cradle in the same Opinion and had read enough of the History of Europe to be still of the same Opinion."²⁹ In 1701, Jonathan Swift took the common metaphor, explored and expanded its meaning and showed that it could be used "either without, or within a State," and did so in a discourse of which Adams wrote, "there is not to be found, in any library, so many accurate ideas of government expressed with so much perspicuity, brevity, and precision" (*Defence*, 1:105). Swift's balance was that known to Homeric heroes, not a dead, motionless balance, but moving, weighing, being hefted. "It supposes three Things. First the Part which is held, together with the Hand that holds it, and then the two Scales, with whatever is weighed therein."³⁰ Swift meant to direct his readers, not so much toward the two scales in which the few and many lie, but above them to the third member of this metaphor—him who holds the beam. Furthermore, through this metaphor another principle of nature has surfaced—"this great truth, this eternal principle"—that there are three orders of men, the one, the few, the many (*Defence*, 2:242).

"Checks and Balances" occur among the three branches of the federal government: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. But does this not conflict with Swift's and Adams's metaphor? For we tend to think of three pans, each pan holding a branch of government. But a three-panned

²⁸ *The History of the American Revolution*, ed. Lester H. Cohen, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), 1:39.

²⁹ L. H. Butterfield ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 4:38. On balance of power between the nations of Europe and John Adams, see James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980).

³⁰ "A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between Nobles and Commons in Athens and Rome," in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 1:197.

balance is an absurdity. The confusion lies in the number three and in the loose and frequent use of the metaphor. First, there are three natural divisions in society; the one, the few, the many. Second, there are three branches (another metaphor), or three operations to any government: the power to make the law, execute the law, and interpret the law.³¹ The metaphor of the balance has been stretched to comprehend these two, separate, tripartite divisions. Did John Adams stretch it like this?³²

Because a balance is reached when the beam is precisely level between two pans suspended equally high in the air, balance implies a mean between two extremes. Like Aristotle, Adams held that no virtue is possible in a state of extremes. There is no happiness without virtue, there is no friendship in a state of extremes (*Defence*, 3:166-67). The best government is that which maintains the middle state in the best way for the longest period. Polybius gives the prize to the constitution of Rome which weaves the one, the few, and the many in a prudent and effective manner. *Isorropoun*, "equally inclined," and *zugostatoumenon*, "steady beamed," are the two words Polybius uses to describe the ideal constitution. He compares the government which employs this method to a boat that sails with the wind—another metaphor.³³

Polybius is not the only one who finds metaphors necessary. Adams cited James Harrington's image of two girls dividing and choosing the cake. Their selfishness leads to equality of pieces and happiness for both (*Defence*, 1:107). When in 1776 the question of one or two assemblies was on the table in Pennsylvania, two assemblies seemed to Benjamin Franklin

³¹ See Clement Walker, *Relations and Observations, Historicall and Politick upon the Parliament Begun Anno Dom. 1640 (1648)*, cited in *The Founders' Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, 5 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 1:314: "The KING is the only supreme Governour of this Realme of England; . . . yet the KING by himself can neither make, repeal, or alter any one law, without the concurrence of both Houses of Parliament, the Legislative power residing in all three, and not in any one. . . . Nor can the King by Himselfe, or joyntly with the Lords and Commons judge what the Law is, this is the office of the sworne Judges of the two Benches and exchequer."

³² For an in-depth treatment of the image and its difficulties (in particular its difficulties with respect to John Adams' philosophy of government), see Correa Moylan Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969).

³³ "So that none of the principles would grow unduly and be perverted into its allied evil, but that, the force of each being neutralized by that of the others, neither of them should prevail and outbalance another, but that the constitution should remain for long in a state of equilibrium like a well-trimmed boat" (10.6.7).

like the practice of taking two oxen when descending a hill, facing them in the opposite direction at the back of the wagon to pull against the two oxen at the front. Adams turned Franklin's metaphor against him: a wagon with four oxen in the front coming down a hill—that is, government by a single assembly—would involve the wagon, the supplies carried, the driver, and the oxen themselves in universal destruction by its too fast descent. Two oxen pulling in front and two behind when descending a hill was the safest, a proven method, and showed the most controlled descent. Nature had proven it was the best method. Government, being governed itself by natural principles, operated according to these principles. Adams quotes Newton's law of motion, that there is "no rest," to support his claim that government is always in motion and not in rest, as Franklin implies from his interpretation. Adams refutes Franklin's oxen with Franklin's lightning rod, which, dispelling the tension in the heavens and creating a balance, tempers and calms the opposing forces of the skies—unlike Zeus's thunderbolt hurled to warn the terrified Achaeans that their fate had sunk in the balance.³⁴ Franklin, although discovering the lightning rod, could not interpret its meaning. Not content to refute and replace, Adams adds another metaphor: the balance of Swift. Metaphors are powerful. A man judges, thinks, understands according to the metaphor applied.

A city cannot be ruled unless the citizens rule themselves. Each citizen has a constitution, that of the body. The constitution of the city, like the constitution of the body, has "certain contextures of the nerves, fibres, and muscles, or certain qualities of the blood and juices." Some parts of the body "may properly be called *stamina vitae*, or essentials and fundamentals of the constitution; parts without which life itself cannot be preserved a moment."³⁵ The home too has its own constitution. Self, home, city prove that to obliterate nobility would destroy all. "There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: The one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects. There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: The one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests."³⁶ Madison's remedies

³⁴ *Defence*, 1:105-7; *Iliad* 8.69-77. See Walsh, *Political Science of Adams*, 330n.

³⁵ Cited in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 68.

³⁶ *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middlebury: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 58.

against the causes of faction were, as he knew well, intolerable. Likewise intolerable was it to remove aristocracy.

Adams and Swift determined that the one plate of the balance would contain the few, the other the many. Though there are fewer in the pan of aristocracy, by their excellences their weight equals the weight of many. The balance should be held by the weakest of the three, "who is to deal the remaining power with the utmost Exactness into each Scale. . . . who may keep the scales duly poised" (Swift, "Discourse," 197). This, for Adams as for Swift, is the one, the king, the consuls, the executive power. The division of the one, the few, the many occurs, not only in the government as a whole, but also within the legislative branch only. The few and the many receive each their own assembly; the one may interpose, as his legislative function, the veto. Thus the one has two hands, one to hold the balance, the other to adjust the weights. From this comes the form of the metaphor with which we are now most familiar: now legislative and executive occupy the pans; the judicial branch with one hand holds the beam and with its other hand—its decisions—adjusts the weights. First the veto, then the Supreme Court's decision, have become the Zeus whom (we have seen) Odysseus describes: "steward of the war of men, he inclines the balance" (19.223-24).

Good depends upon power in the hands of the mediator, the third party in a dispute. John Adams saw America as this mediator, separated from Europe across the expanse (*aequor*) of oceans upon which the power struggle between nations could be seen best and the policy of "friendship and commerce with all nations, alliances with none," would be carried out.³⁷ America, in Adams's hope and view, was to stay apart from the opposing forces of England and France, and be the gainer from it. This would work only if the third party possessed and controlled the power to negotiate. America must have a navy; Adams was its champion. With the advent of the War of 1812, "the successes of our little navy," Jefferson congratulated Adams, "must be more gratifying to you than to most men,

³⁷ Adams complained that his policy had been stolen by Jefferson, and elaborated by Washington in his farewell address (actually Hamilton's, as Adams believed) without proper credit being given to the author of it (*The Spur of Fame*, 30-31). The Latin *aequor* (from *aequus*, "equal") as a poetic term for the sea is the equivalent of our "bounding main" or "the deep."

as having been the early and constant advocate of wooden walls. If I have differed with you on this ground, it was not on principle, but the time. Supposing that we cannot build or maintain a navy, which will not immediately fall into the same gulph which has swallowed, not only the minor navies, but even those of the great second rate powers of the sea. Whenever these can be resuscitated, and brought so near to a balance with England that we can turn the scale, then is my epoch for aiming at a navy" (*Letters*, 324).

An oracle given at Delphi had counseled the Athenians to put their trust in "wooden walls." Themistocles convinced the Athenians that the wooden walls were not a wooden fence around the Acropolis, but rather wooden ships. The Athenians built their navy (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.141–44). After Persia's defeat, the Athenians acted as the mediator (their former allies had harsher words) between the Greek cities because of their naval power, soon abused and finally a cause of their destruction. The holder of the balance must be just, like Homer's working woman. Thus Pindar describes the mediating role of a city, in this case the great island emporium Aegina. "When much hangs in the balance with many ways to go, deciding with correct judgment while avoiding impropriety is a difficult problem to wrestle with. But some ordinance of the immortal gods has set up this seagirt land for foreigners from all places as a divine pillar—and may time to come not tire of accomplishing this" (*Olympian Odes* 8.23–29).

An honest mediator must himself observe the mean. Defending the soldiers of the Boston massacre, Adams walked a middle line, which made him unpopular. Theramenes was called the "sock" by his enemies, the Marquis of Halifax, a "Trimmer"—which "signifieth no more than this, that if men are together in a Boat, and one part of the Company would weigh it down on one side, another would make it lean as much to the contrary, it happneth there is a third Opinion, of those who conceive it would do as well, if the Boat went even, without endangering the Passengers."³⁸ But the "sock" died for his beliefs, and John Adams shared with Halifax an inability to "let his soul stoop so much below it selfe, as to be content, without repining, to have his Reason intirely subdued, or the priviledge of

³⁸ "The Character of a Trimmer," in Mark N. Brown, ed., *The Works of George Savile, Marquis of Halifax*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 1:179.

acting like a sensible Creature torn from him, by the Imperious dictates of unlimited Authority, in what hand so ever it happeneth to be placed" (Halifax, "Trimmer," 1:240). A simile aligned with the working woman and her balance to describe the struggle of armies, two men fight over boundary stones (*Iliad* 12.421-24). Standing between the masses and aristocracy, Solon was a "boundary stone," *oros*. An *oros* marks many things: a field, a journey, a proper time for marriage, notes in a musical scale, the term of a man's life, the decision of a magistrate; it is measure, definition, premise.³⁹ So *stathmos* signifies both a balance and the station or marker to indicate a day's journey. Solon was a wolf among a pack of dogs and he stood among the people with a mighty shield keeping all sides from tearing each other to pieces.⁴⁰ Between orthodox and heretic, Erasmus learned the same lesson as Adams and Halifax: "moderation in all things," so long as you take sides.

Adams felt that the great failure of the Constitution was its weak executive which lacked a "complete negative." "Wisdom and Justice can never be promoted till the President's office, instead of being a doll and a whistle, shall be made more independent and more respectable: capable of mediating between two infuriated parties" (*The Spur of Fame*, 158, 122). Balance means more than moderation, it means independence. Independence was on Adams's mind from the very beginning and it got him called an anarchist for his pains: he sought for the executive more power, more capability of acting independently from the other two branches, and from the two houses of the legislature. Adams claims to have predicted America's independence twenty-one years before Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, to have predicted America's eventual mastery of the seas, England's and France's demise, and America's greater potential of population (*The Spur of Fame*, 87-88). "I must be independent forever, as long as I live. The feeling is essential to my existence."⁴¹ He proposed a toast for the Fourth of July, 1825—"Independence forever." He died on the Fourth the following year.

"Checks and Ballances, Jefferson, however you and your Party may have ridiculed them, are our only Security, for the progress of the Mind, as

³⁹ Liddell-Scott-Jones. *Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word *oros*.

⁴⁰ Douglas Gerber, ed. *Elegiac Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), fragments, 5 (the mighty shield), 36 (wolf among dogs), 37 (boundary stone).

⁴¹ Adams to John Quincy Adams, May 16, 1815, cited in Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) 318.

well as the Security of the Body" (*Letters*, 334). Virtue is not the property of any one man but of actions resulting from that passion, that check, that enemy, which reins in the other passions and makes manifest the virtue. "Every species of these Christians would persecute Desist, as soon as either Sect would persecute another, if it had unchecked and unbalanced Power. Nay, the Deists would persecute Christians, and Atheists would persecute Deists, with as unrelenting Cruelty, as any Christians would persecute them or one another. Know thyself, human Nature!" (*Letters*, 334). What would secure virtue, peace, prosperity for the American republic? At the end of his *History of the American Revolution*, David Ramsay calls on American to "venerate the plough, the hoe, and all the implements of agriculture. Honour the men who with their own hands maintain their families, and raise up children who are inured to toil, and capable of defending their country" (666-67). How ought we to confront the problems in a society? Some blame the people, some the form of government. Jefferson, like Ramsay, believed the greatness of the nation lay with the yeoman farmer, with agricultural purity of manners. Benjamin Rush called upon the schools to reform their systems of education, to expel Latin and Greek from the curriculum, to Anglicize education. Adams had so such illusions.⁴² The yeoman farmer, given power and wealth, the devout Methodist or Deist, the sceptic, the philosopher, the educator, all, if given the chance for power, or the licence of action, without the tempering influence of opposition or of a check, would lose their virtue, "would be tyrants if they could."⁴³ "Adams's genius lay in seizing upon a central truth—in this case, that independence already existed—and, without fatigue to himself, advancing that truth over and over again through seemingly infinite, richly illustrated variations" (Shaw, *Character*, 99). So Adams, too, with the bal-

⁴² Although exuberant in his praise for Machiavelli's clear-sightedness, Adams finds fault with the philosopher's naivete concerning the causes of the evils of Florence. "When we know human nature to be utterly incapable of this content, why should we suppose it? Human nature is querulous and discontented wherever it appears, and almost all the happiness it is capable of arises from this discontented humour. . . . When it is found in experience, and appears probable in theory, that so simple an invention as a separate executive, with power to defend itself, as a full remedy against the fatal effects of dissensions between noble and commons, why should we still finally hope that simple governments, or mixtures of two ingredients only, will produce effects which they never did, and we know never can?" *Defence* 2:46, 53.

⁴³ Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, in L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-84* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) 121, citing Daniel Defoe in *The Kentish Petition*.

ance. His three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions* is a precise focus on the metaphor of the balance, the necessity of a bicameral legislature and an independent executive, and the hammering home of this point over and over again with variety and strength.

Balance worked strongly in Adams's imagination, as an image of necessary stability and prudent action, but also—the scales of Zeus—to signify a moment of decision. Like Hercules in the celebrated fable, he chose for his wife Abigail Smith over the jovial Hannah Quincy. "I found a Passion [for Hannah] growing in my heart and a consequent Habit of thinking, forming and strengthening in my Mind, that would have eat out every seed of ambition, in the first, and every wise Design or Plan in the last."⁴⁴ He would resist the path of easy living and voluptuous companionship and choose the more promising and virtuous balance and check in Abigail.

⁴⁴ *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:73.