In Praise of Balance

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The Ship of State: Statecraft and Politics from Ancient Greece to Democratic America by Norma Thompson (Yale University Press, 243 pp., $35)

Balance is boring, or so in the roaring 1990s it often seemed. We kindled to originals, hearkened to the outspoken and the over-the-top, applauded the outstanding and the extraordinary. What could be more bland and bourgeois, especially when the money was rolling in and the sky was the limit, than balanced diets and balanced budgets and balanced judgments? Don't be divided, be single-minded, exhorted the sages of success. Take a stand, make a difference, get your name up in lights, counseled the conscience of the educated and the ambitious. It's not that we didn't value our comfort and security, but what captured our imagination and excited our admiration was the novel, the cutting-edge, the extreme.

September 2001 compelled us to rethink (or so I ardently hope) many notions; but the truth is that even before our adversaries transformed our passenger jets into weapons of mass destruction and our post offices into a delivery system for bioterrorism, we should have been able to sense that the claims of single-mindedness needed to be balanced against the claims of balance. For our moral and political life, even in the absence of crisis or craziness, constantly invites us to choose: shall we honor the observed differences between men and women or seek to overcome them? Shall we respect political opinions that differ from our own or try to rout them from the field? Shall we live as best we can according to the dictates of reason and the demands of faith, or shall we embrace one and heed those of its imperatives which call for the rejection of the other?

In fact, we are divided about single-mindedness. And there is an excellent reason for seeking intellectual and emotional diversification: our world provides a variety of conflicting goods, and to pursue one with devotion entails the loss of many others. Still, a suspicion nags. Isn't what presents itself as balance–in relations between the sexes, in politics, and in ultimate questions–really a mask for complacency or pandering or failure of nerve?

Mill seems to have pointed a way, a liberal way, out of this quandary. He proposed a blend of balance and single-mindedness. He understood individuality to be a term of distinction and saw it as grounded in strong passion disciplined by virtue and guided by reason. The development of strong and distinctive opinions was an essential part of the formation of truly independent character. For this purpose, society must not only tolerate individuals who

engage competing points of view, it must encourage them to do so. What is most commonly taken away from Mill's classic exploration of the liberty of thought and discussion in the second chapter of On Liberty concerns the danger of complacency: in the absence of challenge, our opinions, even when they are true, grow weak and flabby. Yet Mill had another and deeper reason for encouraging the liberty of thought and discussion. It concerned the danger of partiality and incompleteness. Since our opinions, even under the best circumstances, tend to embrace only a portion of the truth, and because opposing opinions rarely turn out to be entirely wrong, it is crucial to supplement our opinions with alternative points of view.

The liberal way is a spirit or an approach, not a procedure or an algorithm. It does not prescribe an optimal blend of balance and single-mindedness, certainly not concerning the questions about which we care most. Indeed, it might even be said to exhibit a decided tilt toward single-mindedness on the subject of personal freedom. So when it comes to relations between the sexes (as Mill makes clear in The Subjection of Women), women as well as men must be encouraged to think for themselves, to develop their individual talents, and to become autonomous individuals, even though this may lead to a slighting by both sexes of the virtues of sociability and caregiving that traditionally have been thought to be women's special province. In politics (as Mill maintains in Considerations on Representative Government), the liberal way requires an appreciation of the need to accommodate both the party of permanence and order and the party of progress and freedom, though the liberal argument for balance in politics prizes permanence and order for the contribution that they make to progress and freedom, and not for themselves or for the sake of any other human goods that they might promote. As for reason and faith (as Mill explains in his Essays on Religion), the liberal way is committed to keeping an open mind by rationally considering faith's claims. In practice, though, this means that only the part of religion that conforms to the demands of individual autonomy is welcome in public and carries a viable claim to truth and respect.

All its blessings notwithstanding, the spirit of democracy does not make the blending of balance and single-mindedness any easier. As our liberalism, in the guise of reason and fairness, tilts us in our undertakings toward its favored good, freedom, so democracy, under the same guise, inclines us to embrace its highest ideal, which is equality, not only in those spheres where justice demands it but also in those where justice does not and perhaps should not. Democracy presses for an equality beyond the liberal imperative for equality in respect of rights and equality before the law, a democratization of equality that in practice often looks and feels like a demand for uniformity in thought and action. The reason for this excess is that differences–between men and women, between political orientations and objectives, between the secular and the religious–breed distinctions at which the democratic conscience looks askance, and which it works to rein in and wear down and paper over. In contemporary America, there is good reason to wonder whether any power or practice or principle can withstand democracy's progress.

In her iconoclastic and intelligent book, Norma Thompson argues that democracy has indeed induced in us a loss of balance. The adoption of countervailing measures is necessary, she contends, for our own sake as well as for the sake of democracy. Following Tocqueville, whose study of "several oppositions–between aristocracy and democracy, between the spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion, and between masculine and feminine spheres of influence" provided a stimulus for her book, Thompson explores "the intellectual challenge for democrats of holding alternatives in mind at the same time." To achieve a better balance, we need to re-orient our thinking–especially our thinking about men and women, their relations, and how "masculine and feminine spheres of influence" mix, in individuals and in political life.

Historical studies can play a pivotal role in this re-orientation. Rejecting the contemporary conceit according to which previous ideas and forms of political life are at best "flawed precursors to our own prescribed arrangements," Thompson invites her reader on a brisk and learned tour of several high points in the history of political philosophy. Her destinations are the ancient Greek polis, the modern state, and democratic America. In the case of the ancients, her selection of representative authors is unexceptional–Homer, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle–though the inclusion of epic poets, historians, and philosophers invites a question about the omission of tragedians. For the moderns, her eclectic focus on Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Rousseau provides valuable and uncommon juxtapositions. But her coupling of Gertrude Stein with Tocqueville as together providing the key to understanding the challenges posed by democratic America is, as she acknowledges, somewhat eccentric: it yields both illumination and the most strained arguments in the book.

Still, Thompson's lapses do not prevent her from vindicating the salutary methodological point that, far from slavishly reflecting the prevailing views of the day, as democratic dogma often teaches they must, philosophy and literature may rise above and provide a necessary criticism of their times. And in numerous ways and from a variety of angles she successfully defends her central substantive claim that ancients and moderns are impressively united in agreement that success for a political regime as well as for an individual depends upon a weaving of masculine and feminine propensities–a weaving that, in the nature of things, is always, even under the best of circumstances, on the edge of unraveling.

Less persuasively, Thompson also advances a subsidiary thesis about the relation between literature and politics. Literary forms adopted by political thinkers have substantive significance, she argues, such that they "can be ranked as better or worse at ameliorating the perceived shortcomings of their political communities, and of achieving a crucial balance of masculine and feminine principles." This is confused. For one thing, literary forms do not ameliorate political problems, though they may illuminate them. And Thompson goes too far in accommodating postmodern sensibilities when she contends that her study of literary and philosophical writings reveals that "'our solution' is as makeshift as any." While she is right to warn "democrats to be wary of their imperious and unitary ways," what she refers to as "our

solution," or liberal democracy, is firmly–and properly–anchored in our belief in the natural freedom and equality of all, a belief that is the very ground from which we reason, however vulnerable, imperfect, and alienating the political "solution" it anchors may sometimes be.

Thompson aspires to more–"my aim is to recast the tradition"–than she can conceivably deliver. In places her argument is disjointed or forced or rambling. Without much explanation, it reduces whole eras to an idea or two, and reduces these ideas to their expression in a few seminal texts or even a few seminal passages. And despite its professed commitment to reconciling rival principles, it repeatedly flirts with the reduction of politics to rhetoric, as if steering a ship and speaking about steering a ship were one and the same. And yet the general overreaching and the assorted shortcomings are more than offset by Thompson's deft and arresting observations about the balance between male and female principles that must be achieved by captain and crew if the ship of state is to sail smoothly and safely.

Whereas many of her colleagues assume that the ancient Greeks have nothing to offer on the question but exclusion, oppression, and misogyny, Thompson finds that "Greek profundity extends even into reflections on gender." On Thompson's reading, the Odyssey, in recounting Odysseus's great wanderings on his return home from the Trojan War to his wife and son, demonstrates that the household (oikos) and the city (polis) are by nature inextricably connected. It is the rare gift of "likemindedness" that sustains Odysseus in his absence from home, and that he praises as the highest expression of the bond between husband and wife: "No finer, greater gift in the world than that …/ when man and woman possess their home, two minds,/two hearts that work as one." To survive his wanderings, moreover, Odysseus must repeatedly exercise not only his famed cunning but also the feminine virtues of indirection and patient forbearance. At the same time, to keep her many suitors at bay in hopes that her husband will someday return, Penelope is compelled to innovate and take risks in the manner of men. When Odysseus returns and with the help of his son Telemachus slays his wife's suitors, takes back his home, and re-unites with Penelope, he comes full circle: the epic adventure that began with a disruption of a household–the seizing of Helen by the Trojans–ends with the restoration of a household.

Sometimes ancient Greek authors, Thompson observes, reveal their appreciation of the importance of women and the household by demonstrating the disastrous political consequences that stem from their neglect. Although Thucydides says little about women in his History of the Peloponnesian War, this is in part, Thompson maintains, because the decisive figures in his history, the generals and the statesmen whose speeches and deeds he presents, said little. Yet Thucydides does not merely reproduce their silence and their oversight, according to Thompson. By drawing attention to how, despite his great rhetorical gifts, Athens's Pericles forgets the household, elevates love of city over devotion to hearth and home, and promotes in his fellow citizens a loss of a sense of proportion (most dramatically

demonstrated in the ill-fated Sicilian expedition), Thucydides distances himself from Pericles's suppression of the feminine and brings into focus the costs of Athenian one-sidedness.

In the realm of theory, Aristotle also opposed one-sidedness, including the one-sidedness that suppresses the female principle. To be sure, one finds in his thinking familiar exclusions and affronts to democratic ideals: the denial of full participation to women in politics and in virtue, the support for natural slavery, the defense of the contemplative life as the best life. Still, Aristotle articulates the outlines of a well-ordered polis that is (in Thompson's account) distinctively receptive to the feminine. The receptivity is both explicit and implicit. For one thing, Aristotle introduces the household as a constitutive and irreducible element of the polis. For another, he makes the achievement of a balance between the rival claims of the propertied (oligarchy) and the people (democracy) a defining feature of the well-ordered polis. In addition, his understanding of moral virtue–according to which the mean or standard for right conduct is the "mean relative to us," the standard relative to the concrete individual and the particular circumstances in which he must act–reflects the feminine propensity to appreciate context and its complications. Thompson makes a compelling case that by expounding the idea of an objective standard that is nevertheless highly sensitive to context, by providing a kind of anti-formula formula for moral virtue–excellence consists in doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason–Aristotle provides an understanding of ethics that surpasses in insight and suitability the childish relativism and the arid rationalism into which today's democratic theorists constantly slip.

In Plato, too, Thompson finds an ally in the effort to give female principles their due, indeed an "ingenuity in the use of gender." In the Platonic dialogues, Thompson reminds, philosophy is "gendered female," and Socrates singles out for special honor his female teachers: Diotima, who taught him about love, the sole subject in which he claims to be a master; and Aspasia, who taught him about rhetoric, in which he constantly shows his mastery. Thompson might have added that Plato's Socrates seeks to re-interpret the manly virtue of courage as receiving decisive expression in the talk and interiority of fearless philosophical speculation. But Thompson forces matters when she tries to elicit lessons about democratic statecraft from the form of Plato's writings:

The model of writing that Platonic dialogues embody is illustrative of the craft most called for in democracy, as Plato maneuvers between the spontaneity of self-expression and the discipline of self-rule. He shows us a careful balancing of opposites, over against democracy's predilection to settle on one element of dichotomies: talk, not writing, and unequivocal talk at that. The democratic impulse is to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator, to treat different individuals as indifferently distinct bodies. The example of Platonic dialogue suggests that democratic statecraft may be essential if democracy is not to degenerate into the disruption and chaos that led the ancient thinkers to fear it as a path toward eventual tyranny.

There is a parallel between Plato's dialectical preservation of conceptual antitheses and the statesman who, in the face of democracy's tendency to level moral and political distinctions, arbitrary as well as vital, must find a way to balance competing interests and integrate countervailing principles. Yet poetry, even the philosophical poetry that shows the necessity of practical judgment in politics, differs mightily from the statesman's exercise of such judgment.

Early modern thinkers, argues Thompson, are as undeserving as ancient authors of the charge of anti-femaleness routinely leveled against them. To see why, it is necessary to go beyond their most sensational statements and see how the thinkers themselves complicate matters. Machiavelli, modernity's most incendiary founding father, notoriously asserted in The Prince that "fortune is a woman" who must be beaten and struck down; but, as Thompson points out, he also emphasized that, like women (as he understood them), fortune in the end remains in control, deciding who she will let win her and with whom she will be friends. Machiavelli is also condemned for his typically cool and calculating account in The Discourses of the political utility of the rape of Lucretia. But in Mandragola, as Thompson delightfully recounts, Machiavelli reworks the classic story as comedy, transforming a wronged woman acted upon by others into a shrewd manipulator in her own right capable of taking advantage of the bumbling male would-be manipulators who surround her in order to secure her social position and sexual satisfaction.

Almost four hundred years after Machiavelli insinuated that female astuteness and cunning could, and in many cases should, overcome male ferocity (and foolhardiness), Edmund Burke, in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, attacked a different aspect of the male disposition, the tendency to seek transparent clarity about morals and politics through the exercise of abstract reason. Ironically, it was the unleashing of the male propensity to obtain mastery through reason, argued Burke, that lay behind the French revolutionaries' repudiation of their responsibilities, inherited from tradition, to protect women and the feminine:

Little did I dream that I should have seen such disaster fallen upon the Queen of France in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult–but the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.

When a certain feminine modesty is abandoned as a guiding moral and political principle, when "all the decent drapery of life is to be torn off," the complexities and the depths of human nature are not revealed but obscured, for it is part of our nature to make laws, to observe social conventions, and to embody wise restraints in tradition. To which Mary Wollstonecraft, in the Vindication of the Rights of Men, replied that it is foolish to sentimentalize the feminine principle, and to denigrate rights and the universal reason in which they are grounded. Appreciating the merit in both Burke and Wollstonecraft,

Thompson finds in the lateeighteenth-century male defense of the feminine and female defense of the masculine compelling evidence of the inadequacy of commonplace generalizations about the influence of male and female propensities in politics, and of the enduring challenge of effective reconciliation.

The disturbing lesson of modern literature and philosophy, in Thompson's account, is that the challenge is all but insuperable. In greater agreement apparently with Burke than with Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley depicts in Frankenstein the knowledge-seeking and world-mastering impulses, inimical to every harmonization, embedded in the spirit of Enlightenment. Victor Frankenstein's exploitation of science to play God not only produces a monster cut off from human ties and touch, but also leads to the destruction of his own domestic tranquillity. The message from Rousseau, the outstanding modern student of love and friendship, is no more comforting. In Emile, a wise tutor supervises a comprehensive education, stretching from childhood to adulthood, directed toward citizenship and marriage. But even the carefully contrived domestic bliss that Emile and Sophie achieve proves vulnerable. Rousseau's sequel reveals that all the tutor's artifice cannot save Emile from the betrayals of his wife's adulterous affair.

Modern democracy heightens, or gives its distinctive twist, to the challenge of harmonization. According to Tocqueville, the powerful social force that modern democracy brings to the fore, in the name of equality, is a relentless drive to uniformity in thought and conduct. When he journeyed through America in the 1830s, Tocqueville perceived women as checking this dangerous drive. While men were governed by the calculating principle of "self-interest rightly understood," women's education revolved around virtue and self-discipline. Women, who stayed at home out of the public sphere, were the guardians of mores, of the habits of heart and mind on which decent conduct, in private life as well as in public life, depended. Tocqueville understood that their roles "demand much abnegation on the women's part and a continual sacrifice of pleasure for the sake of business," but in this abnegation and sacrifice he saw a portion of women's superiority.

As Thompson emphasizes, Tocqueville recognized the equality of women as well as the cost they bore by staying at home and acting as the custodians of morals and manners. Moreover, "few authors believed with more urgency that it is impossible to contain the spirit of egalitarianism." Yet she concludes that Tocqueville's analysis is unconvincing, owing to "a literary form which cannot sustain his ambitions to counter the homogenizing tendencies of democracy on gender." This is an odd charge to lay at Tocqueville's feet, as if any literary form could counter a social force or a condition, as if ideas cannot survive or overflow forms. The instability or contradiction in domestic relations that Tocqueville's analysis brought to light–democracy in America called upon women to play a role that was inconsistent with the equality and openness to which democracy was devoted–was not a product of rhetoric, however inventive and refined. Nor could rhetoric fix it. And though women have achieved

spectacular and just gains in the public since he wrote, it is by no means obvious that we have found an alternative way to ensure the preservation and the transmission of the habits of heart on which democracy depends.

Thompson's confusing effort to seek political solutions in literary forms culminates in the baffling suggestion that Gertrude Stein's work involves "an attempt to set forth precepts for balancing a political system that strains ceaselessly against balance." Thompson concedes that Stein is at first glance an unlikely model of the democratic theorist. Indeed, Stein's writings abound in the very qualities that Tocqueville diagnosed as symptoms of democratic decadence: a rage for novelty, a disregard for form, a craving for mass appeal, an oscillation between trivial matters and grand speculations. But the deeper Stein, Thompson argues, is the "Socratic Stein." This Stein experiments with styles, exhibits curiosity in all human types, and in her most popular work, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, in which she adopts her lover's persona, she combats the despotism of public opinion through the technique of constantly changing perspectives, shifting subjects, inventing facts, and altering history.

Whatever Stein's literary achievement, surely it cannot plausibly be said to represent a solution to the problem of democratic statecraft. Nor, contrary to Thompson, can Stein's depictions of how she negotiated her highly idiosyncratic relations with her brother, with Picasso, with the heady group of artists and writers in her circle, and with Toklas be seen as providing a model for the democratic reconciliation of male and female propensities. (There is also the unsavory matter of Stein's own political sympathies in occupied France during World War II.) At most, Stein's writings display a solution to the problem of democratic existence for a particular gifted writer.

What impels Thompson, in the attempt to deal with the one-sidedness induced by our democratic inclinations, to make do with a sort of politicized aestheticism, and to offer only the trite suggestion that individual self-creation is the solution to the problems posed by modern democracy? Isn't the dogma of self-creation a characteristic conceit that flatters the democrat's sense of sovereignty and independence, itself a lopsided solution that tends to neglect the claims of reason and convention and duty and faith?

A part of the explanation for this disappointing culmination lies in Thompson's persistent overestimation of the power of rhetoric. "In Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Burke, and others," Thompson asserts in the conclusion to her book, "the essence of statecraft is rhetoric, a rhetoric that displays the danger of imbalance and, either directly or indirectly, contains the required correctives." But this is mistaken, both concerning the views held by the thinkers in question and concerning the actual truth of the matter. For one thing, it implies that thinkers rather than officeholders are the master statesmen. For another, rhetoric may display imbalance and clarify correctives, but it cannot on its own restore balance or correct things. For this, something more is needed. Words must not be mistaken for deeds, even if words are sometimes also deeds. While the art of rhetoric is indispensable to statecraft, the essence of statecraft is not rhetoric but judgment or prudence, which Burke called "the god of this lower

world." Judgment is grounded in experience of human affairs and knowledge of human nature. To get things done requires judgment, including judgments about rhetoric, about what must be said and how it must be said in order to get things done. For the sake of democracy and for the sake of justice, rhetoric, which is as useful to the vicious despot and conniving demagogue as it is to the enlightened statesman, must remain judgment's handmaiden.

Thompson knows this. That is why she also offers in her conclusion a more modest and sensible understanding, more consistent with the primary thrust of her many and valuable interpretive insights, of how the study of classic literary and philosophical texts can provide a salutary corrective to democratic lopsidedness. By introducing readers to possibilities and alternatives that might otherwise remain hidden or inaccessible, such study helps to combat our complacency and partiality. Indeed, such study enables one to formulate a question that seems vital to understanding moral and political life but that remains hidden and inaccessible to most card-carrying political scientists: "What aspects of human nature, when recognized and kept in some basic form of balance, provide the strongest foundations for the agreements and arrangements that a flourishing political community needs?" To pursue such an investigation would force into the open important issues that democrats (and political scientists) tend to treat as settled or uninteresting, a conceit that is another form of democratic lopsidedness.

Among such issues, certainly, is the status of the propensities, the qualities, or the characteristics that Thompson calls male and female. Many will think, under the influence of the democratic impulse to uniformity, that the whole idea of sexually specific propensities is rubbish. Surely our world furnishes no end of examples of women who have learned to be cold and calculating and cutthroat, and men who know how to cry and to care for babies and to confess their feelings. Some will think that such propensities as we have are real but culture-bound, socially constructed, and capable of endless manipulation and revision. Some will think that our propensities are hardwired in our genes, and the attempt to resist nature futile or harmful. Some may believe that male and female propensities are inscribed in our souls.

What cannot plausibly be denied is that every male and every female, every relationship and every political order, is a mixture of what have been traditionally thought of as manly or assertive qualities–those propensities that cluster around courage, including hard-headedness and hard-heartedness–and those that have been traditionally thought of as female or caregiving qualities–those that cluster around gentleness, including compassion and the tender sentiments. Since both sets of qualities are essential to a full human life and a well-ordered politics, the aim is to strike the balance, to weave them together, in ourselves, in our friendships and our loves, in our political institutions.

Balance in the human spirit, which must not be mistaken for ambivalence or splitting the difference or playing both sides against the middle, is neither bland nor bourgeois nor

boring. It is not a resigned concession to partiality, but a bold gamble on wholeness. It is not the midway point between virtue and vice, but an artful arrangement of virtues that enables them to supplement and to strengthen rather than to subvert each other. Since it involves an openness to the variety of human passions and possibilities, balance is a liberal imperative. Since courage without gentleness is destructive and gentleness without courage is defenseless, balance is a human good. Since balance is, for men and for women, not only an extreme but also a perfection, it is genuinely a thing of beauty to behold.