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## MYTH, MEMORY, AND HISTORY \*

M. I. FINLEY

The Fathers of History were Greeks. Historians of antiquity are very proud of that, so much so that they prefer not to remember that some of the best minds in antiquity were not all impressed by this achievement. History as a discipline has always been a great favorite with the coiners of *bons mots* — it is false, it is dangerous, it is bunk. But it has never been dismissed more peremptorily, in a serious way, than in the famous dictum in the ninth chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics*:

Poetry is more philosophical and more weighty than history, for poetry speaks rather of the universal, history of the particular. By the universal I mean that such or such a kind of man will say or do such or such things from probability or necessity; that is the aim of poetry, adding proper names to the characters. By the particular I mean what Alcibiades did, or what he suffered.

Historians can comfortably ignore the jibes and doubts of Walpole or Henry Ford, or even Goethe, but Aristotle is another matter; Aristotle, after all, founded a number of sciences and made all the others his own, too, in one fashion or another — except history and economics. He did not jibe at history, he rejected it. No wonder the ninth chapter has been perhaps the worst sufferer of all in the familiar “grousing about what are thought to be Aristotle's omissions” in the *Poetics*.<sup>1</sup> It has been called “inadequate”; it has been explained away by clever exegesis, as if Aristotle were one of the pre-Socratic philosophers of whom only a few cryptic sentences survive, which can be made to fit a thousand different theories; or it has been politely dismissed as not dealing with history at all. This last argument has a dangerous element of truth in it. It is not only Chapter Nine which does not deal with history; Aristotle never does. Apart from two incidental references in the *Poetics*, he fails even to mention the subject again in all the vast corpus of his extant works. Nothing could speak more emphatically than that massive silence. Evidence from the past, the past as a source of paradigms, is one

\* A shorter version of this essay was delivered as a lecture at the Warburg Institute on 28 October 1964. I am grateful to Professor G. S. Kirk and Dr. E. R. Leach for criticisms and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Humphry House, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1956), 11.

thing; history as a systematic study, as a discipline, is another.<sup>2</sup> It is not weighty enough, not philosophical enough, not even in comparison with poetry. It cannot be analyzed, reduced to principles, systematized. It tells us merely what Alcibiades did or suffered. It establishes no truths. It has no serious function.

One can go much further. All Greek philosophers, to the last of the neo-Platonists, were evidently agreed in their indifference to history (as discipline). At least that is what their silence suggests, a silence broken only by the most fleeting of whispers. Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus is reported to have written a work called *On History*, and so, too, the latter's younger friend Praxiphanes, another Peripatetic. Beyond their titles, nothing is known of either work. Speculation about their content is idle. We must simply record the total disappearance of both works, the fact that they are never quoted by Diogenes Laertius, for example, or by the commentators on Aristotle.<sup>3</sup>

What philosophy would not have, rhetoric took possession of. It is a sobering thought that the only ancient work to have come down to us which pretends to be a systematic essay on historiography is Lucian's *How to Write History*, written soon after A.D. 165. And that is nothing but a concoction of the rules and maxims which had become the commonplaces of a rhetorical education, a shallow and essentially worthless pot-boiler.<sup>4</sup> Its one point of interest for us is that five hundred years after Aristotle, Lucian was still setting history against poetry. Historians themselves had long since accepted the need to compete for favor with poetry – by surrendering and writing works which Polybius dismissed with the sneering label, "tragic history".<sup>5</sup> Not every historian, but too many, and, what is crucial, even the stoutest of the resisters failed to break down either the indifference of the philosophers or the taste of the ordinary readers.

Why poetry? The answer, of course, is that by poetry Aristotle and the others meant epic poetry, late lyric poetry such as Pindar's, and tragedy, which portrayed the great figures and the great events of the past. The issue

<sup>2</sup> See generally on this distinction G. H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History before Historicism", *History and Theory*, III (1964), 291-315, especially 292-304. The distinction is missing in Raymond Weil, *Aristote et l'histoire. Essai sur la "Politique"* (Paris, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> I have not forgotten Poseidonius, the one apparent exception to what I have said about Greek philosophers and history. But not even this author of a (lost) large-scale historical work in the rhetorical tradition made the slightest contribution to historical method, let alone to philosophy of history. In factual inaccuracy and downright dishonesty, furthermore, in writing unscrupulous political propaganda under the cloak of history, Poseidonius probably stands bottom of the list among the "reputable" ancient writers of history.

<sup>4</sup> See Gert Avenarius, *Lukians Schrift zur Geschichtsschreibung* (Meisenheim/Glan, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> See F. W. Walbank, "History and Tragedy", *Historia*, IX (1960), 216-34; C. O. Brink, "Tragic History and Aristotle's School", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, No. 186 (1960), 14-19. The very detailed survey by Hermann Peter, *Wahrheit und Kunst. Geschichtsschreibung und Plagiat im klassischen Altertum* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1911), remains invaluable.

was not whether or not, or to what extent, such poetry was historically reliable, in the sense in which we ask that kind of question of the ancient epics today, but the deeper question of universality, of truth about life in general. The issue, in short, was that between myth and history. By "myth" I mean what is commonly meant, in ordinary usage, by "myth" or "legend", and not the more metaphorical senses, as in the phrase, "the racist myth", or in the well-known extensions of the term by such modern thinkers as Sorel or Cassirer.<sup>6</sup> I mean such myths as that of Prometheus, of Oedipus, of the Trojan War.

The atmosphere in which the Fathers of History set to work was saturated with myth. Without myth, indeed, they could never have begun their work. The past is an intractable, incomprehensible mass of uncounted and uncountable data. It can be rendered intelligible only if some selection is made, around some focus or foci. In all the endless debate that has been generated by Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ("how things really were"), a first question is often neglected: what "things" merit or require consideration in order to establish how they "really were"? Long before anyone dreamed of history, myth gave an answer. That was its function, or rather one of its functions; to make the past intelligible and meaningful by selection, by focussing on a few bits of the past which thereby acquired permanence, relevance, universal significance.<sup>7</sup>

When Herodotus was in his prime, the distant past was very much alive in men's consciousness, more so than the recent centuries or generations: Oedipus and Agamemnon and Theseus were more real to fifth-century Athenians than any pre-fifth-century historical figure save Solon, and he was elevated to their ranks by being transformed into a mythical figure. Annually the mythical heroes re-appeared at the great religious festivals in tragedy and choral ode, and they recreated for their audiences the unbroken web of all life, stretching back over the generations of men to the gods; for the heroes of the past, and even many heroes of the present, were divinely descended. All this was serious and true, literally true. It was the basis of their religion, for example. There is a fine passage by Robertson Smith which sums the picture up:

In ancient Greece . . . certain things were done at a temple, and people were agreed that it would be impious not to do them. But if you had asked why they were done, you would probably have had several mutually contradictory explanations from different persons, and no one would have thought it a matter of the least religious importance which of these you chose to adopt. Indeed, the explanations offered would not have been of a kind to stir any strong feeling; for in most cases they would have been merely different stories as to the circumstances under

<sup>6</sup> On the modern extensions of "myth" see e.g., B. Halpern, "'Myth' and 'Ideology' in Modern Usage", *History and Theory*, I (1961), 129-49.

<sup>7</sup> The point is well brought out in the opening pages of P. Munz, "History and Myth", *Philosophical Quarterly*, VI (1956), 1-16.

which the rite first came to be established, by the command or by the direct example of the god. The rite, in short, was connected not with a dogma but with a myth.<sup>8</sup>

Greeks did not love epic and tragedy, however, solely because they needed to be reminded about the origins of their rites, important as that function was for the individual – and even more for the community, which was rooted in divine patronage and ancestry. Myth was their great teacher in all matters of the spirit. There they learned morality and conduct; the virtues of nobility and the golden mean or the menace of *hybris*; and they learned about race and culture and even politics. Were not both Solon and Pisistratus accused of falsifying the text of the *Iliad*, interpolating two lines in order to have Homeric authority for the seizure of Salamis from the Megarians?<sup>9</sup>

With this background it is not surprising that history should have been discussed and judged in antiquity, should have been measured, against poetry. Fundamentally, one kind of retelling of the past was being measured against another. For there must be no misunderstanding about one thing: everyone accepted the epic tradition as grounded in hard fact. Even Thucydides. He tells us that right off, as soon as he finishes introducing himself. The Peloponnesian War, he argues, is more worthy of narration than any which preceded, “for it was the greatest movement thus far among the Hellenes and among a portion of the barbarian world”, greater, specifically, than even the Trojan War. He argues this at some length, and among the “historical” personages whom he introduces in his opening pages there appear Hellen, son of Deucalion (the eponymous ancestor of the Hellenes), Minos, king of Crete, and Agamemnon, and Pelops. Details are uncertain, he says, both about the remote past and about the period before the Peloponnesian War – a most significant coupling – but the general outlines are clear and reliable. Homer exaggerated, because he was a poet and properly employed a poet’s license, and Thucydides, unlike the vulgar majority, allowed for this in his introduction. Thucydides himself, we remember, warns his readers that his own work will not cater to the demand for exaggeration and poetic adornment; it will relate the facts free from romance. But neither Thucydides nor Plato nor Aristotle nor anyone else proceeded to outright scepticism about what a modern writer might call the historical kernel in the epic, and surely not to outright denial.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, whatever else it may have been, the epic was *not history*. It was narrative, detailed and precise, with minute descriptions of fighting and

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (new ed., London, 1907), 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> The lines are II 557-58: “Ajax brought twelve ships from Salamis, and bringing, he stationed them alongside the ranks of the Athenians.”

<sup>10</sup> Even more striking is the way Thucydides (III 104, 5) accepts lines 165-78 of the “Homeric” Hymn to Apollo as an autobiographical bit by Homer. See F. Hampl, “Die Ilias ist kein Geschichtsbuch”, *Serta Philologica Aenipontana* (= *Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft*, VII-VIII) (1962), 37-63

sailing and feasting and burials and sacrifices, all very real and very vivid; it may even contain, buried away, some kernels of historical fact – but it was not history. Like all myth, it was timeless. Dates and a coherent dating scheme are as essential to history as exact measurement is to physics.<sup>11</sup> Myth also presented concrete facts, but these facts were completely detached: they were linked neither with what went before nor with what came after. The *Iliad* begins with the wrath of Achilles over an affront to his honor and ends with the death of Hector. The *Odyssey*, as background to the travels of Odysseus, mentions the ending of the Trojan War and the return of some of the heroes. But it all happened “once upon a time”, flowing out of nothing (for the rape of Helen is merely another isolated fact, totally unhistorical in any significant sense) and leading to nothing. Even within the narrative the account is fundamentally timeless, despite the many fixed numbers (of days or years). “These numbers, most of them typical numbers which recur for all possible quantities, are in general not binding; they are not the bases for calculations or synchronizations. They merely indicate, broadly, magnitude or scale, and in their stylized pseudo-precision they symbolize long duration. To all intents and purposes there is no interest in chronology, whether relative or absolute.”<sup>12</sup> Many years later the Greek tragedians maintained the same indifference: Oepidus, Iphigenia, Orestes all did things or suffered things which were believed to be historical facts, but what occurred floated dimly in the far-away past, unconnected by time or pattern with other events.

Timelessness is reflected in still another way, in the individual characters. Death is one main topic of their lives (along with honor from which it is inseparable), and fate is often the chief propelling power. In that sense they live in time, but in no other way. It ought not escape any reader of the *Odyssey* that when the hero returns after twenty years, he and Penelope are exactly what they were half a generation earlier. It escaped Samuel Butler, to be sure, when he wrote:

There is no love-business in the *Odyssey* except the return of a bald elderly married man to his elderly wife and grown-up son after an absence of twenty years, and furious at having been robbed of so much money in the meantime. But this can hardly be called love-business; it is at the utmost domesticity.<sup>13</sup>

The poet does not say that Odysseus was bald and elderly; Butler says it, and this is presumably what he called reading the Homeric lines “intelligently” by reading “between them”. It goes against common sense and “intelligence” for Odysseus not to be bald and elderly by the time of his return. The flaw – and Samuel Butler is only a convenient whipping-boy for a frequent

<sup>11</sup> See I. Meyerson, “Le temps, la mémoire, l’histoire”, *Journal de psychologie*, LIII (1956), 333-54.

<sup>12</sup> H. Fränkel, *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1960), 2.

<sup>13</sup> *The Humour of Homer and Other Essays*, ed. R. A. Streatfeild (London, 1913), 77. Perhaps I should say that I have not the slightest doubt that in this lecture, delivered in 1892, Butler was speaking in earnest.



practice – is to apply modern historical thinking in the guise of common sense to a mythical, non-historical tale. Historical husbands and wives grow old, but the plain fact is that neither Odysseus nor Penelope has changed one bit; they have neither developed nor deteriorated, nor does anyone else in the epic. Such men and women cannot be figures in history: they are too simple, too self-enclosed, too rigid and stable, too detached from their backgrounds. They are as timeless as the story itself.

Perhaps the most decisive example comes not from Homer but from his near contemporary Hesiod.<sup>14</sup> The opening of the *Works and Days* contains one of the most famous of all primitivistic tales, the account of man's decline from a golden age of the past in several stages, each symbolized by another metal: after gold comes silver, then bronze or copper, and finally iron (the present age). But Hesiod's vision is not one of progressive deterioration, of evolution in reverse. Each race of men (Hesiod speaks of races, *genê*, not of ages) does not evolve into the next; it is destroyed and replaced by a new creation. Each race exists neither in time nor in place. The races of man are as timeless as the Trojan War: for the future as well as the past. And so Hesiod can lament: "would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before *or been born afterwards*" (lines 174-75).<sup>15</sup>

It is possible that the myth of the four metallic ages or races was an eastern one in origin, Hellenized by Hesiod. But there was also a fifth age or race, and that was surely Greek through and through, the age of heroes injected between the bronze and the iron. "But when earth had covered this [bronze] generation also, Zeus the son of Cronos made yet another, the fourth, upon the fruitful earth, which was nobler and more righteous, a god-like race of hero-men who are called demi-gods, the race before our own, throughout the boundless earth." This is patchwork, unavoidable because the myths of the heroes were too deeply fixed in the mind, too indispensable to be passed by. Patchwork is the rule in myth, and it gives no trouble. Only the historically-minded see the rough stitches and the faulty joints and are bothered by them, as is abundantly evident in Herodotus. But Hesiod was not historically minded. Here on the one hand were the four races and here on the other hand was the race of heroes. They were data, and his task was to assemble them. He did it in the easiest way possible, thanks to the total absence of the time element. There were no chronological problems, no dates to be synchronized, no development to trace or explain. The race of heroes had no beginning in history: it was simply made by Zeus. And it had no ending, no transition to the next, contemporary stage. Some of the heroes were

<sup>14</sup> It is convenient (and in this context, harmless) to speak of Homer and Hesiod each in the singular, ignoring the complex problem of the authorship of "their" poems.

<sup>15</sup> See J.-P. Vernant, "Le mythe hésiodique des races", *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CLVII (1960), 21-54.

destroyed before the gates of Thebes and in the Trojan War. "But to the others father Zeus the son of Cronos gave a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the ends of the earth. And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean."<sup>16</sup>

There is a sense, of course, in which the myth of the ages is not a proper myth. It is too abstract. Hesiod's poem deals, in its first part, with the problem of evil, and no blacker, more despairing indictment of the injustice of the world has ever been written. Why, he asks, why is the world so full of evil? His first answer is mythical in its most traditional sense; he tells the story of Prometheus and Pandora: that is the answer, a typically mythical answer, the kind of answer Greeks continued to give to explain rites and beliefs all through their history. But now, he continues without pause, I will tell you another tale, and his second one, the alternative to the Pandora myth, is the account of the races of man. Clearly there is a new kind of thinking here, inchoate, poetic and not systematic, not followed through and not even properly linked with the rest of the long poem, but nonetheless pointing to an entirely new line of intellectual endeavour and pointing away from myth and epic. "What was at the beginning?" Gigon said of Hesiod, "is the question of history precisely at the point where it turns into philosophy . . . The question Hesiod poses is no longer about the historical past, but about the beginning of what exists, the question of philosophical origins . . ."<sup>17</sup> But "history" is wholly out of place here. Hesiod is foreshadowing the step from *mythos* to *logos*, and that step was not mediated by history. It bypassed history altogether. It moved from the timelessness of myth to the timelessness of metaphysics.

More than two centuries went by before time and the (more recent) past were linked in a chronological system. That was the work of Herodotus, as a feat of the intellect perhaps the greatest of his achievements.<sup>18</sup> Writing in the third quarter of the fifth century, Herodotus conjectured that Homer lived four hundred years earlier (about 850 B.C.) and that the Trojan War took place another four hundred years before that (about 1250 B.C.). Many events were known to have occurred during that long interval, such as the return of the Heraclids to Sparta, the various (and chronologically incompat-

<sup>16</sup> *Works and Days*, 156-71. I use the translation of Hesiod by H. G. Evelyn-White in the *Loeb Classical Library*. Vernant, *op. cit.*, has very ingeniously argued that the whole Hesiodic structure is a coherent one. Even if he should be right, my central argument stands, for the structure of the myth he finds is architectonic, not chronological.

<sup>17</sup> *Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie von Hesiod bis Parmenides* (Basel, 1945), 22-23. Gigon is talking about the *Theogony*, but the remark seems equally relevant to the opening of the *Works and Days*.

<sup>18</sup> H. Strasburger, "Herodots Zeitrechnung", in W. Marg, ed., *Herodot* (Darmstadt, 1962), 677-725, a revised version of an article originally published in *Historia*, V (1956), 129-61.



ible) deeds of Theseus, or the legislation of Lycurgus. These Herodotus was totally unable to fit into his chronological scheme. The fault was not his, but a consequence of the fact that the data were timeless, and therefore un-historical. The measure of his genius lies in the simple point that he appreciated these limitations (if not to the extent of disbelief in the "fact" of Orestes and Theseus and the rest) and therefore he made no effort to assign dates to the undatable myths. Herodotus' historical chronology is far more accurate than has usually been allowed, equally so in his refusal to ruin it by incorporating the mythical events. The latter frequently recur in his work, but as something detached, as something which happened once upon a time, unlike, say, the career of Solon or the reign of Polycrates in Samos. Polycrates, says Herodotus (III 122), seems to have been the first Greek to think of a maritime empire, "leaving aside Minos" and others like him, the first, in other words, "in what is called the time of men" – which we should express as the first in historical, as distinct from mythical, times.<sup>19</sup> What Herodotus was able to do was to establish some kind of time-sequence for perhaps two centuries of the past, roughly from the middle of the seventh century B.C. on. All that came before remained as it had been when he began his work, epic tales and myths believed to be true, at least in essence, but incorrigibly timeless.

The plain fact is that the classical Greeks knew little about their history before 650 B.C. (or even 550 B.C.), and that what they thought they knew was a jumble of fact and fiction, some miscellaneous facts and much fiction about the essentials and about most of the details. One need only consider Thucydides' introduction, which I have already mentioned, in which he justified his own effort by offering in twenty-one chapters (a dozen pages) a most remarkable interpretation of early Greek history. From Chapter Fourteen he was on pretty firm ground, established by Herodotus (whose book he had studied with great care) with the indispensable help of Egyptian, Persian, and other Near Eastern records. But in the first part he had nothing to go on other than Homer and other "old poets", tradition, contemporary evidence, and a very powerful and disciplined mind. The result is a sweeping theory, namely, that Hellenic power and greatness emerged only in consequence of the systematic development of navigation and commerce, which were followed by an accumulation of resources, stable community organization, imperialism (to use an anachronistic word), and finally the greatest of all Greek power struggles, the Peloponnesian War. This theory may be right, in whole or in part, or it may be wrong – I am not concerned with that question here. What is crucial is that it is a theory derived from prolonged meditation about the world in which Thucydides lived, not from a study of history. True, there is something here which is history in a conceptual sense: Thucydides has made

<sup>19</sup> See P. Vidal-Naquet, "Temps des dieux et temps des hommes", *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CLVII (1960), 55-80, at 65-69.

the bold suggestion that there was a continuity and a development in Greece from the most ancient (mythical) times to his own. I do not underestimate this new conception, but its actual working out by Thucydides in his opening pages is not history in any meaningful sense of that word. Instead he has given us what amounts to a general sociological theory, a theory about power and progress, applied retrospectively to the past, and applied, one must add, with caution and hesitation, for, as Thucydides explains at the outset, one cannot achieve certainty about ancient times, one can merely say that this is what all the "signs" point to.

Among the signs are astonishingly few concrete events: the first thalassocracy "known to tradition" (that of King Minos), the Trojan War, a few migrations, change in habits of dress and in the practice of carrying arms, the extension from Sparta to the Olympic games of the practice of competing entirely naked in athletics, and a few other scraps – until the age of tyrants and Persian annals. There are only four dates: the migration of the Boeotians to Boeotia sixty years after the Trojan War and of the Dorians into the Peloponnese twenty years after that; the construction of four triremes (an important new invention) by the Corinthian Ameinocles for the Samians three hundred years before the end of the Peloponnesian War (i.e., about 700 B.C.); and forty years later the first recorded naval battle, between Corinth and Corcyra. Thucydides does not date the Trojan War, but if he accepted Herodotus' chronology, then he has no dated event between 1170 and 700 B.C., a period equal in length to that between the accession of Henry VII and our own day. Everything that fell between could only be fixed as "later" or "much later". Moreover, we have no independent check on his two late dates, and we can dismiss his two early ones as still in the realm of myth, whatever the truth about the movements of Boeotians and Dorians.

But we do have some control over the general picture of material progress and migration, and the result is negative (quite apart from the possible validity of the sea-power theory itself). Twice in this section Thucydides argues explicitly from what we should call archaeological evidence, once from the ruins of Mycenae and the other time from the bones and artifacts uncovered when Delos was purified in 426/5 B.C. (in Thucydides' own lifetime) by opening all the graves and transferring their contents to the adjacent island of Rhenaea. The arguments are clever and cogent, but are they valid? On the contrary, they reveal a gross ignorance and misunderstanding of the past on several points of major significance. Thucydides was clearly unaware (as were all other Greek writers, so far as we know) of the catastrophic destruction of Mycenaean civilization near the end of the second millennium B.C. and of the profound discontinuity between Mycenaean civilization and Greek civilization proper; he "did not recognize Geometric . . . pottery as being particularly Greek and dated it at least three hundred years too early"; he "either did not know of what we call the Bronze Age or else dated its end too early".

In sum, in his view, "Agamemnon's Mycenae and fifth-century Mycenae could be thought of as one city, repaired and casually rebuilt but essentially the same."<sup>20</sup>

These mistakes, coupled with the absence of all dates and of virtually all fixed events between 1170 and 700, destroy any possibility of a proper history of early Greece. I do not mean that Thucydides tried to write one, even in capsule form, and failed: on the contrary, he did not try because he did not believe it possible or necessary. I mean, rather, that from such a start no Greek could write one, and the proof is in the pathetic failure of those men in later centuries who tried to write annals and universal histories from the Trojan War (or from the creation of the world) to their own day. They lacked the information, and there was no way they could get it. Of this we can be confident, as we can confidently correct Thucydides' mistakes about the fall of Mycenae or the origin and date of Geometric vases. More than that, we know much more (and much more accurately) about the political trends and the growth of cities and the development of trade and money and so on through the whole list of institutional and social phenomena. And yet, we too are wholly incapable of writing a history of this period. That is our inescapable heritage from the Greeks. We can, for example, discourse with considerable subtlety and sophistication – and with inherent probability – about the decline of monarchy and the rise of the aristocratic *polis*, but we cannot narrate that story, not even in fragmentary fashion, for any single community; we are gradually assembling much information about the physical appearance of early Ionian cities and we can date their development to close limits, but we have no significant knowledge about the political life within them; we can lay out the vases in most elaborate series, but we know nothing about the potters or the pottery industry. And we never shall. In short, like Thucydides, we can formulate sociological theories, and unlike him, we can write art history (largely restricted to pure externals). But we, too, cannot write a history of early Greece.

The reason is very simple: there are no documents, nothing which records events or reports who did things, what things, and why. Before the year 700 B.C. (a round number which I continue to use as a signpost, not as a precise date) such documents never existed, not even in the most transient form, on papyrus or wax. After 700 a body of Greek writing began to emerge, steadily increasing in volume and variety as the classical world of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. drew nearer. Little survives, some quotations in later writers and fragmentary collections recovered in the present century on Egyptian papyri of Hellenistic and Roman times. It is not beyond hope that more will be found in the future which will add to our stock of information,

<sup>20</sup> R. M. Cook, "Thucydides as Archaeologist", *Annual of the British School at Athens*, L (1955), 266-70. Note that Herodotus (II 125) thought that iron tools were used in building the pyramids.

much as the new fragments of the poet Alcaeus have taught us things about the political struggles within the aristocracy of Lesbos round the year 600, and about the tyranny of Pittacus which had been as mysterious in its details as it was famous in legend. Were every lost line written between 700 and 500 to be recovered, including the texts of laws and decrees as well as poems and philosophical writings, a generation of historians would be kept busy sorting and organizing and interpreting the new material – and we should still be unable to write a history of those two centuries, let alone of the earlier centuries.

That gloomy prediction follows inevitably from the nature of the material. For complicated reasons – which I do not believe we are in a position to formulate fully – the writing of epic poetry came to a rather abrupt end. Poets turned their backs on the past, both on the literary forms of the past and on the past as subject-matter, and they began to write about themselves and their friends, their loves and hates, their feelings, their joys and their pleasures. For two centuries all the poetry was personal; it might be flippant or anacreontic, it might be amatory (Sapphic or otherwise), or it might be serious, moralistic and philosophical – but always it dealt with personal problems and generalities, not with narration nor with politics or society in their concrete institutional expressions.<sup>21</sup>

I hate the lanky officer, stiff-standing, legs apart,  
Whose cut of hair and whisker is his principal renown;  
I prefer the little fellow with his bigness in his heart,  
And let his legs be bandy, if they never let him down.

These lines of Archilochus<sup>22</sup> reveal a new, un-heroic, un-Homeric set of values. Others offer biographical bits – “We, the down-and-outs of Hellas, flocked to Thasos in a troop” – often with important social implications (in this instance, the appearance of the mercenary soldier). They are precious bits, given the sparseness of our knowledge of these centuries, but they cannot be converted, not even if they were counted in the tens of thousands, into a consistent and continuous story of how the Greek cities emerged, grew, took shape, struggled, and lived. Nor do the philosophical writers add another dimension. And that is all there was.

No one before the fifth century tried to organize, either for his own time or for earlier generations, the essential stuff of history. There were lists – of the kings of Sparta and the archons of Athens and the victors in the various games. They could provide a chronology, if we knew what happened in the archonship of X or the reign of Y; but we do not know, except in a few isolated instances about a few isolated events. Law codes and individual

<sup>21</sup> One might consider some of Solon's poems as exceptions, but they are so lacking in concreteness, even about his own reforms, that they argue for my generalization, not against.

<sup>22</sup> Translated by Denys Page in *The Listener*, 15 Jan. 1959, 109-10.

rulings were recorded somehow, but there were no proper archives, and they soon disappeared from sight for the most part. This combination of negatives – the absence of annals (like those of the kings of Assyria), the indifference of poets and philosophers, and the loss of public documents – is irrevocable. Unless a generation is captured on paper and the framework of its history fixed, either contemporaneously or soon thereafter, the future historian is forever blocked. He can re-interpret, shift the emphases, add and deduct data, but he cannot create the framework *e nihilo*. That is why we can write the history of the Persian Wars, thanks to Herodotus, and the history of the Peloponnesian War, thanks to Thucydides, but not the history of the intervening fifty years, not for all the writers of tragedy and comedy and all the inscriptions and material objects unearthed by modern archaeologists.<sup>23</sup>

Contemporary archaeology is a highly refined, highly professional and technical procedure. Carbon-14 dating and similar techniques will one day produce firm evidence undreamed of in the world of Thucydides. Yet it would be a great mistake to explain our superior knowledge of Mycenae by reference to scientific advances. Technically, Schliemann and Sir Arthur Evans had little at their disposal which was not available to fifth-century Athenians. The ancient Greeks already possessed the skills and the manpower with which to discover the shaft-graves of Mycenae and the palace of Cnossus, and they had the intelligence to link the buried stones – had they dug them up – with the myths of Agamemnon and Minos, respectively. What they lacked was the interest: that is where the enormous gap lies between their civilization and ours, between their view of the past and ours. A reverse example comes from their use of literary evidence. Thucydides and his contemporaries knew the full corpus of lyric and elegiac poetry, but they made less use, and less skilful use, of this material for historical analysis than we make of the few scraps which have survived in our time. Again neither technique nor intelligence is a useful criterion; only interest will explain the difference.

Some kind of interest in the past is, of course, universal. That statement helps very little, however, though it is repeated often enough in books about history and the writing of history, as if it were an important point worth making.<sup>24</sup> Insofar as it is not just a tautology – man by nature has memory, including memory of things told to him by older generations, and therefore he has an

<sup>23</sup> It must be understood that no pre-fifth-century Greek historical writing ever existed (eventually the chronographers “annalized” myths, which is another matter). All arguments to the contrary have been completely destroyed by the work of Felix Jacoby; see particularly his *Atthis* (Oxford, 1949).

<sup>24</sup> The more common variation, perhaps, is this: “Western man has always been historically minded” – the opening words of J. R. Strayer’s introduction to the English translation of Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York, 1953 and Manchester, 1954).

“interest” in the past – it has no meaning which is not either wrong or confusing. Interest in the sense of curiosity or desire for knowledge is, in ordinary usage, a term of individual psychology, descriptive of a state of mind or feeling, not sufficient as an explanation of individual behavior, totally useless when extended to a society. Interest must itself be defined and accounted for: what part of the past and how much of it? Interest to what purpose, to fulfil what function? The past has been studied didactically and morally, as an exemplar of man’s essential sinfulness, for example, or as a guide to future political action; it has performed the social-psychological function of giving a society cohesion and purposiveness, of strengthening morale and encouraging patriotism; it can, and has, been put to romantic uses. And so on. Each of these interests requires a different kind of approach and a different kind of study (within limits) – in short, a different kind of knowledge.

None of the interests I have just enumerated requires a systematic account of the past. The question which is implicit in so much modern writing on the history of history – how could the Greeks (or anyone else) remain content with a past which was filled with so many blank spaces and which was, essentially, timeless? – rests on a false conception of time in human psychology. We are in thrall to the highly sophisticated, highly abstract scientific conception of time as a measurable continuum, a conception which is largely meaningless for ordinary human purposes. Time past consists of a number of individual events (including biological transformations and sensual satisfactions); time future consists of anticipated events or satisfactions. Duration of time, if it is a consideration at all, which is not always the case, is not experienced as a measurable quantity but as an associative or emotional quality: time drags, for example.<sup>25</sup> Individual memory illustrates this exactly. We do not recall a past event, whether we are consciously searching our memories for one or one comes to mind without deliberation, by working our way from the present through the past. Memory leaps instantaneously to the desired point and it then dates by association. There is a certain consciousness of duration, to be sure, but that is satisfied by “long ago” or “the other day”, or by an association which implies “long ago”, for example, “when I was still a schoolboy”.

This is familiar and obvious, and it is as true of group experience as of personal experience. Claud Cockburn records a revealing meeting with three Ladino-speaking Jews in Sofia shortly after the Second World War. He had approached the three men in the railway station, not knowing who or what they were. After attempting conversation in several languages without success, he tried Spanish.

<sup>25</sup> On all this see Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley, 1955); cf. e.g., P. Bohannan, “Concepts of Time among the Tiv of Nigeria”, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, IX (1953), 251-62.



They understood, [he writes] and replied in what was certainly intelligible as a form of Spanish – though a very strange form . . . . I remarked that it was rather odd to find Spaniards here [in Sofia]. They explained. They were not Spaniards, but, one of them said, “Our family used to live in Spain before they moved to Turkey. Now we are moving to Bulgaria.” Thinking that perhaps they had been “displaced” from Spain by the upheaval of the civil war, I asked how long it had been since their family lived there. He said it was approximately five hundred years . . . . He spoke of these events as though they had occurred a couple of years ago.<sup>26</sup>

Essentially the “historical” references of these Ladino-speaking Jews were like the “mythical” references of most Greeks, with one difference the significance of which is more potential than actual. When pressed, the former translated “our family used to live in Spain” into “it was approximately five hundred years ago”. They were able to do that thanks to the modern calendar, with its dating by years from a fixed initial point. The Greeks eventually acquired that technique, too, when dating by Olympiads was introduced, but that remained for them an artificial convention, invented and used by a small number of antiquarian-minded intellectuals, never introduced into daily life. And that brings us back to the matter of interest. The only people in antiquity who were somehow “modern” in this respect were the Hebrews, and the interest which lay behind, and which provoked, their detailed account of the past as a continuum was, of course, a religious one, the story of the unfolding of God’s will from the Creation to the final triumph in the future. The Greeks had no such interest, religious or otherwise; whatever the function in the present of Agamemnon, it did not require locating him along a time continuum; it did not matter whether he lived two hundred years ago or four hundred or a thousand.

Effectively, Greek thinking divided the past into two parts, two compartments, the heroic age and the post-heroic (or the time of the gods and the time of men). The first was the part fixed, defined, and described by the myth-makers, who worked in the centuries which are, to us, prehistoric in the strict sense. They created and transmitted myths orally, bringing together purely cult material (the origins of which can be speculated about, but not documented), genuine historical events (including personal details about the noble families), and much purely imaginary material. Their orientation was towards the past; at first, presumably, towards the more recent past, but, as time went on, increasingly – and to a considerable extent, deliberately – to more remote times. The interest, however, was not historical in the sense of an objective inquiry into the facts of the Trojan War (or any other period of history). That is obvious, but it needs saying, as Hampl, for example, has recently said at length in an article entitled “Die Ilias ist kein Geschichts-

<sup>26</sup> *Crossing the Line* (London, 1958), 155.

buch".<sup>27</sup> Even when we put aside esthetic considerations, the pleasures evoked by the beauty of the lines and the chanting, or the not inconsiderable satisfactions aroused by a story simply because it is a good story, the remaining interests lay far outside the realm of inquiry and science. National pan-Hellenic or regional consciousness and pride, aristocratic rule, and especially their right to rule, their pre-eminent qualifications and virtues, an understanding of the gods, the meaning of cult practices – these and other, comparable, ends were served by the continual repetition of the old tales. And by their constant re-working, for new conditions were always intruding.

In this first phase, then, when oral tradition was built up and kept alive, the product was a mythical past created out of disparate elements, differing in their character and their (factual) accuracy, and having their (factual) origin in widely scattered periods of time. "Tradition" did not merely transmit the past, it created it. In a shape which sometimes looks like history, and has been widely accepted as history both by the Greeks and (with qualifications) by many modern students, the bards fashioned a timeless mythology.<sup>28</sup> Then a new phase set in, symbolized by the eventual writing down of the epics and other mythological documents. In a world which lacked any kind of central authority, political or ecclesiastical, and which was filled with separate and often clashing political and regional interests, this step helped fix the texts of the tales, creating an authoritative version. Important as that was, however, it need not, by itself, have been decisive. The myth-making process did not stop in the eighth century; it never wholly stopped. Apart from the mythicizing of men like Solon, myth-making continued because Greek religion continued to develop new rites, introduce new gods, and combine old elements into new forms, each step requiring an appropriate adjustment in the inherited mythology. Likewise, the great dispersion of Greeks from about 750 to about 600 B.C., carrying them to southern Italy, Sicily, and to many other places along the Mediterranean and Black Sea shores, demanded further changes to suit new political alignments between cities and regions and to incorporate traditions of the (non-Greek) peoples among whom they settled. All this later myth-making activity, however, was secondary: the "mythical charter" of Hellenic self-consciousness was now fully fashioned.<sup>29</sup> Interests moved in new directions.

The second phase was therefore one in which interest in the distant, and

<sup>27</sup> The reference is given in note 10. Cf. my article initiating a discussion of the Trojan War in *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXXIV (1964), 1-9.

<sup>28</sup> "Clothed in terms of a sober, pseudo-scientific 'history'" is S. F. Nadel's phrase for the analogous accounts of the distant past among the Nupe of Nigeria: *A Black Byzantium* (London, 1942), 72.

<sup>29</sup> "The myth as it stands, and as it is treasured by the people of Nupe, is... the typical 'mythical charter' [Malinowski's term] of the kingdom, and its common knowledge constitutes the first and foremost of these common beliefs and forms of cultural 'commonness' which supply the background of political unity", *ibid.*, 75-76.

important, past, though fully alive, expressed itself in retention and repetition of the mythical charter. Along with the writing down of the epics went the disappearance of the bards as a class. They were replaced by rhapsodes, men like Plato's Ion who were professionals too, but reciters – actors – not creators. The creative intellects, as I have already said, turned to entirely new fields, to personal and contemporary poetry and to philosophy. The heroic past needed no further attention, other than the passive one of seeing to it that everyone was reminded of it, in the accepted version, on all appropriate occasions, and that each succeeding generation retained this knowledge and made use of it in the same ways.

How and by whom, we must then ask, were traditions about the post-heroic centuries preserved and transmitted? How, for example, did the memory survive of the sea-battle between Corinth and Corcyra or of the construction by a Corinthian of four warships for the Samians, which Thucydides reports and to which he even assigns precise dates? Thucydides himself could have read about these things in Herodotus or in some other writer. But someone put them down on paper for a first time two hundred or more years after the event (and there were many other traditional facts of a still earlier date, requiring oral transmission for still more centuries). The first man to write them down (and in some instances that may well have been someone as late as Thucydides) had no documents or archives to draw on – that cannot be stressed too often. He had to capture something which had been transmitted orally.

Oral tradition is an old favorite in books dealing with distant ages, or even with fairly recent ages, for which there are few (or no) written records. And there are few notions which historians of the Greek Dark Age are less prepared to examine critically enough, enveloping themselves in the warm glow thrown off by the word "tradition". Now there is the tradition which shapes a large part of our lives, perpetuating customs, habits of behavior, rites, ethical norms and beliefs. There is nothing mysterious about tradition in this sense; it is transmitted from one generation to the next, partly by the ordinary process of living in society, without any conscious effort on anyone's part, partly by men whose function it is to do so: priests, schoolmasters, parents, judges, party leaders, censors, neighbors. There is also nothing reliable about this sort of tradition; that is to say, its explanations and narrations are, as anyone can judge by a minimum of observation, rarely quite accurate, and sometimes altogether false. Reliability is, of course, irrelevant; so long as the tradition is accepted, it works, and it must work if the society is not to fall apart.

But "tradition" detached from living practices and institutions – a tradition about a war two hundred years back, for example – is not the same thing at all; only a semantic confusion seems to place it in the same category. Wherever tradition can be studied among living people, the evidence is not

only that it does not exist apart from a connection with a practice or belief, but also that other kinds of memory, irrelevant memories, so to speak, are short-lived, going back to the third generation, to the grandfather's generation, and, with the rarest of exceptions, no further. This is true even of genealogies, unless they are recorded in writing; it may be taken as a rule that orally transmitted genealogies, unless some very powerful interest intervenes (such as charismatic kingship), are usually fictitious beyond the fourth generation, and often even beyond the third. There is a nice Greek illustration: the Homeric heroes recite their genealogies frequently and in detail, and without exception a few steps take them from human ancestors to gods or goddesses.

The analogy with individual memory is again useful. It, too, normally stops at the third generation, with things told by grandparents, by parents about their parents, by elderly nurses. It, too, is controlled by relevance. All memory is selective, and though the reason why something remains (apart from something actively and deliberately learned, like a school lesson), more often than not escapes us, that is a defect in our knowledge, not a manifestation of random, purposeless behavior. But then the analogy breaks down, for "group memory" is never subconsciously motivated in the sense of being, or seeming to be, automatic and uncontrolled, unsought for as personal memory so often appears. Group memory, after all, is no more than the transmittal to many people of the memory of one man or a few men, repeated many times over; and the act of transmittal, of communication and therefore of preservation of the memory, is not spontaneous and unconscious but deliberate, intended to serve a purpose known to the man who performs it. He may misjudge his motives, he may not formulate them clearly, he probably does not go through a long prior process of reflection, but invariably he is acting, doing something, bringing about an effect he desires or wills. Unless such conscious, deliberate activity occurs, eventually the memory of any event will die; whereas individual memories can lie dormant for decades and then come to life without warning or conscious action.

Oral tradition, therefore, is not a tool the historian can count on "in the nature of things". He must always ask *Cui bono?* In my judgement, for the post-heroic period well into the fifth century, the survival of the sort of tradition I have been discussing must be credited largely to the noble families in the various communities, including royal families where they existed, and, what amounts to the same thing in a special variation, to the priests of such shrines as Delphi, Eleusis, and Delos. They alone, in most circumstances at least, had both the interest to "remember" events and incidents which mattered to them (for whatever reason), and the status to impress that memory sufficiently to convert it into a public tradition. It goes without saying that neither the interest nor the process was historical – perhaps I should say "historiographical" – in any significant sense. The objective was an immediate

and practical one, whether it was fully conscious or not, and that was the enhancement of prestige or the warranty of power or the justification of an institution.

Several conclusions follow. In the first place, the losses, the numbers of facts which were completely and irrevocably forgotten by everyone, were enormous, in a never ending process. Much depended on the fortunes of the individual families, as to whether their particular memories became public memories, and then as to the duration and purity of the tradition in succeeding generations.

Second, the surviving material has the appearance of a random scatter. For example, Thucydides writes (I 13, 2) that the "Corinthians, they say, were the first to pursue the naval art in a modern sort of way, and Corinth was the first place in Greece where triremes were constructed." No names are mentioned, but in the following sentence Thucydides adds the irrelevant fact that a Corinthian named Ameinocles built four triremes for Samos, presumably the first on that island. Why this curious choice? As far as our evidence goes, no name of the inventor of triremes had come down in the tradition, but Ameinocles did (no doubt among the Samians). We cannot possibly explain this particular survival pattern, nor can we in most of the other instances, for the explanation rests in contemporary circumstances about which we know absolutely nothing. That is why I speak of the *appearance* of a random scatter, of a large number of individual facts most of which bear no visible connection with one another, as if pure chance, the throw of dice, determined whether they were to be remembered or not. They did not even have a close chronological connection until one was imposed upon them. Thucydides' dates for Ameinocles and for the battle between Corinth and Corcyra are his own calculation, not the tradition as he received it. And, though we cannot check either date, there are strong reasons for believing that they are much too early, assuming that the two events are facts, not fictions. Given the paucity and the scatter of the tradition, it would be sheer luck if he or anyone else were able to construct an accurate chronological relationship.

Third, individual elements of the tradition were conflated, modified, and sometimes invented. Family rivalries, conflicts between communities and regions, changes in power relationships, new values and beliefs – all these historical developments shaped tradition. They had a relatively free hand with what was happening currently, but often they could not afford to ignore traditions they themselves had inherited. Where a vital interest was affected, it was imperative that corrections be made. Even in a world which makes considerable use of writing, this process is not too difficult; for example, falsification of archaic Athenian political developments was characteristic of the political pamphleteering and party conflict in Athens in the last years of the Peloponnesian War and the next two or three decades. So effective was

this falsification that neither fourth-century Athenians nor modern historians have been able to unscramble the pictures which were drawn. And when tradition is entirely oral, conflation and falsification are childish simple to bring about. They cannot, indeed, be prevented.<sup>30</sup>

Truth, however, as I have already said, truth in the Rankean sense of “how things really were”, was neither an important consideration nor a claim one could substantiate. Acceptance and belief were what counted, and the Greeks had all the knowledge of the past they needed without the help of historians. The poets took care of the heroic past; for the rest, specific traditions, largely oral, were sufficient. In Athens, the Solonic codification, the tyrannicides, Marathon were the stock allusions of political orators and pamphleteers, and everyone knew all that anyone needed to know about them. Occasional efforts by historians to correct factual errors in the tradition met with no response, as Thucydides’ angry remarks about the tyrannicides reveal.<sup>31</sup> Harmodius and Aristogeiton were essential to the Athenian mythical charter, which the truth would have damaged and weakened. Even in the fourth century, after Herodotus and Thucydides, Athenian orators still clung to their traditional myths and their popular history, utterly indifferent to the new knowledge and the new conceptions. Demosthenes could be as precise as anyone about current affairs, citing customhouse records and treaties and court proceedings to support his facts and figures, but about the past he was as ignorant, perhaps deliberately so, as his hearers, restricting himself to the same commonplace references – and inaccuracies – as his opponents, and his audience.<sup>32</sup>

It is both an intellectualist and a modernist fallacy to think that this is what requires explanation. On the contrary, the difficult question is why anyone – specifically, why Herodotus and Thucydides – broke so radically from the customary attitudes and “invented” the idea of history.<sup>33</sup> The conventional answer begins with the Ionian philosophers and their scepticism, and that contains a half-truth. The Ionians and their successors provided two necessary conditions, their scepticism about the myths and their notion of “inquiry”. These were, however, not a sufficient reason, as I have already said in discussing Hesiod. Scepticism about myth led the Ionians to inquiry about the cosmos, to metaphysics, not to historiography. We must still ask

<sup>30</sup> See Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, V (1963), 304-45, on this and several other problems I have already discussed.

<sup>31</sup> See Jacoby, *Atthis*, 152-68.

<sup>32</sup> See L. Pearson, “Political Allusions in the Attic Orators”, *Classical Philology*, XXXVI (1941), 209-29; S. Perlman, “The Historical Example, Its Use and Importance as Political Propaganda in the Attic Orators”, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, VII (1961), 150-66.

<sup>33</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), 19: “The conversion of legend-writing into the science of history was not native to the Greek mind, it was a fifth-century invention, and Herodotus was the man who invented it.”



why Herodotus applied the word *historia*, which simply means “inquiry”, to an inquiry into the past. His own answer is given right at the beginning of his work: to preserve the fame of the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and barbarians and to inquire into the reasons why they fought each other.

The reasons why they fought each other: that is not a new question. After all, myth gave the reasons why the Greeks and Trojans fought each other, and reasons why many other events occurred. What is new in Herodotus is not only the systematic inquiry he pursued in seeking answers, which produced an historical narrative, but the extent to which his explanations are human and secular, and, in particular, political. In the next generation Thucydides then carried those novelties very much further, as he insisted on continuous narrative with a strict chronology, on a rigorously secular analysis, and on an equally rigorous emphasis on political behavior. The new impulse came from the classical *polis*, and in particular the Athenian *polis*, which for the first time, at least in western history, introduced politics as a human activity and then elevated it to the most fundamental social activity. A new look at the past was required. That is to say, not that no other impetus could have produced the idea of history,<sup>34</sup> but that among the Greeks this was the decisive condition (in combination with the scepticism and habit of inquiry already mentioned).

The new look had to be secular, non-mythical, and political – but did it have to be historical in the sense of a survey over a long period of continuous time? More precisely, for how long a period, for how much of the past? If one considers the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides without prejudice, the obvious – though not the most familiar – answer is that not much of the past was really relevant. Herodotus wandered about a great deal in the past, the mythical as well as the historical, the Egyptian as well as the Greek, but for reasons which were more often than not irrelevant to that part of his inquiry which was properly historical. Thucydides rejected that kind of digression, that “romancing”, so completely that his work contains no continuous past history at all. When Thucydides decided in 431 B.C. that the Greek world was entering the greatest war ever and that he would devote his life to recording it, that war was still in the future. Ultimately, he wrote an introduction, drawing some generalizations about the Trojan War and the emergence of the classical Greek world, and filling a little of the gap between Herodotus’ narrative and the onset of the Peloponnesian War. But that was no more than an introduction, conceptually historical, as I have already said, but not history. Everything else was contemporary.

Thereafter serious Greek historical writing was about contemporary history. In a brilliantly phrased paragraph, Collingwood said: The Greek

<sup>34</sup> See J. G. A. Pocock, “The Origins of Study of the Past: A Comparative Approach”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, IV (1962), 209-46.

historian “cannot, like Gibbon, begin by wishing to write a great historical work and go on to ask himself what he shall write about . . . Instead of the historian choosing the subject, the subject chooses the historian; I mean that history is written only because memorable things have happened which call for a chronicler among the contemporaries of the people who have seen them. One might almost say that in ancient Greece there were no historians in the sense in which there were artists and philosophers; there were no people who devoted their lives to the study of history; the historian was only the autobiographer of his generation and autobiography is not a profession.”<sup>35</sup>

This may be too simple, too one-sided; it is not simply false. Thucydides found himself caught up in contradictory pulls, which he was never able to resolve. He accepted the need to narrate events in sequence, but on the other hand he wished to extract from the events the essence of politics and political behavior, the nature and consequences of power. That, if he could achieve it, would be a “possession for ever”, among other reasons because human nature is a constant and therefore recurrence is the pattern. But if so, what is the point to a linear account over long periods of time? One can really know only one’s own time, and that is sufficient anyway. The past can yield nothing more than paradigmatic support for the conclusions one has drawn from the present; the past, in other words, may still be treated in the timeless fashion of myth. There is a relevant passage in Sir Isaiah Berlin’s *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, which is about Tolstoy but in which one could substitute the name of Thucydides and go a long way (though not the whole way) without sacrificing accuracy:

Tolstoy’s interest in history began early in his life. It seems to have arisen not from interest in the past as such, but from the desire to penetrate to first causes, to understand how and why things happen as they do and not otherwise . . . from a tendency to doubt and place under suspicion and, if need be, reject whatever does not fully answer the question, to go to the root of every matter, at whatever cost . . . . And with this went an incurable love of the concrete, the empirical, the verifiable, and an instinctive distrust of the abstract, the impalpable, the supernatural – in short an early tendency to a scientific and positivist approach, unfriendly to romanticism, abstract formulations, metaphysics. Always and in every situation he looked for “hard” facts . . . . He was tormented by the ultimate problems which face young men in every generation . . . but the answers provided by theologians and metaphysicians struck him as absurd . . . . History, only history, only the sum of the concrete events in time and space . . . this alone contained the truth, the material out of which genuine answers . . . might be constructed.<sup>36</sup>

So one wrote *War and Peace*, the other the *Peloponnesian War*. I am not

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, 26-27; cf. A. Momigliano, “Storiografia su tradizione scritta e storiografia su tradizione orale”, *Atti della Accademia delle Scienze di Torino*, XCVI (1961-62), 1-12; “The Place of Herodotus in Historiography”, *History*, XLIII (1958), 1-13, reprinted in his *Secondo Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome, 1960), 29-44.

<sup>36</sup> (London, 1953), 10-11.

being frivolous when I put it that way. History “contained the truth”, and for Thucydides that meant that it was unnecessary to invent as the poets did. But it was also impossible merely to record what had happened. It was necessary to compose speeches which would lay bare the appropriate arguments (appropriate in Thucydides’ judgment) on both sides of an issue. It was even necessary to write a sophistical treatise on might and right, the Melian Dialogue. The narrative alone proved a failure in the end: it told only what Alcibiades did and what he suffered. Those were facts, not truths.

After Thucydides every serious historian wrestled with the same difficulties, and usually preferred to wrestle with them in the field of contemporary history. The idea of a historical narrative, of a continuum of events in time, had come to stay. But what purpose was it to serve? That question was never answered satisfactorily. The idea had arisen, and had been nurtured, that society was bound to its past, and up to a point could be understood from its past, in ways which differed from the old ways of myth. That idea was thwarted, however, by the absence of an idea of progress, by the idealization of the eternal and immutable against the changing and transient (“a rigorously anti-historical metaphysics” in Collingwood’s phrase), by cyclical views of history, by primitivistic doctrines. On the intellectual level everything was against the idea of history. Only the Tolstoyan types struggled on, stimulated by each extraordinary situation or development to try again: Timaeus and the fierce struggles in Sicily over tyranny, Polybius and the establishment of Rome’s world-empire; or, among the Romans, Sallust and the disintegration of the Roman Republic, Tacitus and the emergence of despotic absolutism. Like Thucydides, each of these men was ultimately seeking to understand and explain his own, contemporary world.

Their appeal and influence are hard to measure. It is significant, however, how quickly historians abandoned the austerity of Thucydides for the emotional appeals of the poets, how history became “tragic history”, even in Polybius who denied it so vehemently. It is also significant that the philosophers rejected the whole enterprise. As for the people at large, there is no reason to think that they ever moved beyond the old myths and the occasional bits of mythicized history. Why should they have, after all? As Hans Meyerhoff said in a different, but somewhat related, context: “Previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we do, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it . . .”<sup>37</sup> Myth achieved that, and there was nothing in the society which required its abandonment or replacement. Perhaps that was a flaw in the *polis* – but that is a different subject.

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<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, 109.