



Thucydides

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THUCYDIDES

W. P. WALLACE

THERE IS SOMETHING rather intimidating about Thucydides. The way in which his struggle to express his meaning sometimes breaks the bonds of grammar and of logic gives one an impression of pent-up intensity of feeling and of thought which is almost alarming. And yet there are many passages in which (as a scholiast once said) the lion smiles. The impression which his book as a whole makes upon most readers is rather one of detachment, of clarity, of accuracy.

One way or another violent and opposite opinions have been held about Thucydides. Some call him a scientist, some a dramatist, some a philosopher; some consider him the most objective of historians, others the most subjective. His book, on the surface at least, is calm, cool, and factual, and the author has done his best to efface himself; it seems strange that his few detractors should be so sweeping in their condemnation, his many admirers so reverent in their approval.

Thucydides wrote one book only, the *History of the Peloponnesian War*; he wrote it (without undue modesty) to be a possession for all time; we have received it intact, and most educated people have read it. More than that, modern historians of the Peloponnesian War do little but summarize or paraphrase Thucydides; hardly anyone doubts that his account is sound in all essentials—we see the war as he saw it, and understand it as he understood it. His is a remarkable achievement, which it is difficult to parallel. Perhaps only Euclid has similarly dominated men's thought upon an important subject, for so long a time.

The composition of the history seems in some ways strange to a modern reader. The rather complicated introduction undertakes to show first that no previous war had been so serious, and then that the causes of this one were not those alleged at the time, but rather an upset in the balance of power in Greece. These points are established partly by analysis in the manner of the historical essayist, partly by allowing carefully selected events to speak for themselves, and partly by putting into the mouths of certain actors (who are usually unimportant individuals) speeches which they clearly never spoke, speeches which are patently Thucydidean both in matter and in expression. Of course Thucydides claims that the speeches keep as close as possible to the

This paper was read at the meeting of the American Philological Association in Detroit on December 30, 1961; the criticisms of colleagues, among whom I gratefully mention J. A. Davison, G. M. A. Grube, and E. T. Salmon, have occasioned some changes, and some references have been added.

general sense of what the speakers actually said. Some scholars have succeeded in believing this—among them A. W. Gomme—but Mme de Romilly, in a recent book, shows conclusively, I think, that their matter is as Thucydidean as their form.¹ Then, with a good story or two, and a brilliant character sketch of Themistokles—all thoroughly in the manner of Herodotos which he later carefully eschews—Thucydides finally settles down to his own highly individual method of presenting events and their significance by alternate sections of speech and narrative. Only once or twice in the body of the book does he again make use of the methods of the essayist or the story-teller; and there are no more character sketches.

It is clear that with the beginning of Book 2 Thucydides has hit his stride; he has discovered and adopted what he has found to be the most satisfactory method of handling his material; the experimental stage is over. Some changes of method occur in the later books, but they are minor. From now on the whole story is told in closely connected and nicely balanced sections of analytical speech and significant narrative. It has been shown that Thucydides' style and method were much influenced by his older contemporaries Protagoras and Antiphon the Orator, not to mention other sophists whose known peculiarities have affected his work. But Thucydides knew how to lend subtlety to the somewhat frigid and obvious devices of sophistic argument. His art conceals itself so well that the reader thinks he draws his own conclusions from the simply-told events and the antithetically-opposed opinions of those involved on either side. Thucydides himself makes hardly any comments, and yet the reader feels deeply convinced at every stage that he understands exactly what is happening, that, like the spectator of a great drama, he sees events rushing to their only possible conclusion; he feels that he knows, where those who took part in the events could only guess.

Such, in a nutshell, is the character of Thucydides' history. As one reads, everything seems to happen naturally, and in strict chronological order. What was at issue at every stage, what the contestants thought the situation was, and what they planned to do about it, the reader is allowed to discover from the words of the actors themselves. Between a quarter and a third of Thucydides' history is occupied by speeches which set forth with vigour and intensity the insights and prejudices, the hopes and fears, the plans, the ideals, the villainy, of the contestants. Nowhere does the author present his own analysis of the situation, or of the trend of events.² There is no open moralising, there are no little essays to

¹*Histoire et raison chez Thucydide*, by Jacqueline de Romilly (Paris 1957). Gomme summarizes his own view on pages 125–126 of *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1962).

²3.82–83, the essay on “stasis,” is certainly in form an analysis of the situation, and

explain how institutions worked, how armies operated, how decisions were arrived at. There are, in short, no footnotes to justify statements, no appendices to explain difficulties. And yet somehow all seems clear. The story is so absorbing that the reader is carried along with no thought but for what is happening, fascinated by the way in which the fate of Athens seems, incredibly, to have been both avoidable at every stage and necessary from the beginning.

But if one re-reads or studies the book one becomes increasingly uneasy. One would like, for instance, to be told more about the author. On occasion, where it is strictly relevant, he does speak of himself; he mentions that he was painstaking in his inquiries, that he suffered from the plague, that he saved Eion from Brasidas, that he had interests in Thrace, and that he was exiled from Athens. But that is all. No aside in the first person expresses his own prejudice, no irrelevant remark lets us see his difficulties in collecting his material, there are no references to family or to relatives; Thucydides is for us a name to which we can attach no anecdote, no interesting detail. So it is that when one escapes from the spell of the *Peloponnesian War*, one wonders inevitably about the author. What is he really doing? Was it all so clear? Did he really see and understand everything?

If one comes to distrust, even very slightly, a man so obviously competent and scrupulous and careful as Thucydides, one cannot merely turn to some other authority, obviously not to Diodoros, or to Plutarch. If Thucydides is to be confronted with a different opinion, if one is to doubt his judgment on important matters, one must have unimpeachable evidence. It is true, for instance, that Thucydides' contemporary Aristophanes attributes the war to Perikles' private, and disreputable, difficulties; but no one takes this seriously. If Thucydides is to be doubted it must be either as a result of studying Thucydides himself, or on the basis of contemporary documents, documents of which the relevance is obvious and the meaning clear. So one naturally turns to the inscriptions in the hope that they will provide the touchstone for which we are looking, that Thucydides may be measured against them and discovered to be as dependable in fact as he is in appearance, or that, possibly, we

some would apply that phrase also to the Melian dialogue (5.85–111). I think, however, that in these, and in some other famous passages, Thucydides is more concerned to show how the principles of human psychology underlie all of history than to analyse or explain the individual events. It seems obvious, for instance, that the real reason for the wide-spread "stasis" so characteristic of the Peloponnesian War was Athens' frequent if not regular support of democratic parties in the allied cities, and Thucydides in other passages is well aware of this (e.g., in 3.47.2). If in 3.82–83 he confines himself to psychological analysis, it is because here he is not really thinking of Korkyra, or even of the Peloponnesian War—he is thinking of history as a whole. What we have here is rather a groping after a philosophy of history than the analysis of a particular situation.

may find serious omissions in his account, clear misunderstandings, indications of prejudice, conscious or unconscious. But when the evidence has been collected and shuffled and winnowed and sifted, the results are disappointing. Thucydides is still more useful for the restoration of inscriptions than inscriptions are for the correction of Thucydides. Once, on a famous occasion, when Thucydides names the two commanders of a small squadron, the same squadron appears in a financial inscription with *three* commanders, and the second of Thucydides' two names is wrong; worse than that, the difference cannot be explained away, for we think we can see how he came to misread the name. Here Thucydides stands convicted of an error of fact, and a careless one at that; but the fact was a very minor one. I labour the point only because this, and one or two equally small but more debateable matters, are the only errors of which contemporary documents enable us to convict him; wherever we can test them, Thucydides' details are extraordinarily accurate.

Our surviving documents do, however, make it obvious that a great deal which seems to us (and seemed to the Athenians) to be interesting, pertinent, and important, has been omitted by Thucydides. It is especially in financial matters that the authors of the *Athenian Tribute Lists* and others are at last enabling us to fill out the picture.³ I may mention two or three instances. We now know that the five thousand talents of the Reserve Decree, or at least a large part of it, was spent on the building of the Parthenon with its gold and ivory statue, and on other buildings on the Athenian Acropolis. Five thousand talents, in terms of the cost of labour, should be translated as three or four hundred million dollars. That is an important fact, which throws light on Athens' imperial position, but Thucydides does not refer to it. We know the cost of the revolt of Samos in 440 B.C.—1276 talents, or roughly \$100,000,000. This sum was more than Athens' total annual income from all sources, and might well have made Perikles hesitate to risk a war which would certainly involve many similar expenses; Thucydides obviously approves of Perikles' policy, but he makes no comment on the financial risks which it entailed. The revolt of Potidaia was one of the causes of the war. Thucydides allows us to understand that the revolt was due to the pro-Corinthian sympathies of Potidaia, but he does not mention that the little city's tribute had been increased, just over a year before it rebelled, from six talents to fifteen. But so it was, and we cannot help wondering whether financial considerations may not have been a reason for the revolt along with pro-Corinthian sympathies. In 425 B.C. Athens tripled the tribute of her allies—we know this from a number of sources, both epigraphical and literary, but Thucydides is not one of them. Athens

³*The Athenian Tribute Lists I-IV* by B. D. Meritt, H. T. Wade-Gery, and M. F. McGregor (Cambridge, Mass. 1939-1953).

was bankrupt, and without this huge increase in tribute could hardly have continued the war. When Athens ruthlessly destroyed Melos in 416 B.C., Thucydides uses the event—which was in itself unimportant—as the occasion for the so-called “Melian Dialogue” which throws a lurid light upon the immorality of Athenian imperialism. Thucydides should surely mention here what we know from contemporary inscriptions, that ten years earlier Melos had been contributing to the Spartan war chest, and that tribute had been assessed on her by Athens. Is it omission or suppression when a historian fails to record pertinent facts which cast doubt on his interpretation? So it goes. Time after time Thucydides omits to mention important financial facts of which we have since become aware through the study of inscriptions, financial facts which not infrequently suggest a different interpretation of events from his.

But his omissions are by no means confined to finance. What Gomme calls his “self-imposed limitations” are really extraordinary. One need not regret his refusal to tell good stories, like his great predecessor Herodotos, or to indulge in gossip from which we might have picked up incidental information, but it is more serious that he gives us no character sketches of generals or political leaders—even in the case of Perikles we must go to Plutarch to get any real impression of the man. And what seems to us the necessary background for understanding even purely military history—the geographic, economic, cultural, and political circumstances of the times—is all omitted by Thucydides. Even on the strictly military side his silences are amazing; there are no details of military organisation, no references to the commissariat, no indications of routes of march. We do not know, for instance, whether the Peloponnesians in their first invasion marched by land across the Isthmus of Corinth, or went by sea to Boiotia and so down into Attica. And there are no descriptions of training, of upkeep, of equipment, or of ships: thus it is still uncertain whether Athenian triremes had three banks of oars or only one. In his singleness of purpose, Thucydides deals with little except military events. He was, perhaps, reacting from the discursive, digressive, chatty, and familiar manner of Herodotos. If so, it was a violent reaction.

Sins of omission may be regrettable, but they can perhaps be accounted for in one way or another. The charge which a bright young Cambridge philosopher brought against Thucydides half a century ago is infinitely more serious.⁴ F. M. Cornford maintained that Thucydides wrote not history, but tragedy; that the events of the Peloponnesian War and the characters of the Athenian leaders are warped and twisted in his book to fit the general scheme of a Greek tragedy; that Thucydides, in short, aimed not at historical accuracy, but at literary effect. Cornford tried

⁴*Thucydides Mythistoricus* by F. M. Cornford (London 1907).

to show that the protagonists in the history are lay-figures, that they embody *ὑβρις*, *πλεονεξία*, *ἐλπίς*, *ἀπατή*, and *ἀτή*—the pride, the self-seeking, the hope, the blindness, and the infatuation which possess the tragic hero and drive him to his fate, as, in Thucydides' view, they possessed and destroyed Athens. When the real character of an event or of an individual seemed not to fit its role in the tragedy of Athens, then that event, or individual, Cornford maintains, was ruthlessly misrepresented by the historian. Cornford finds the clearest evidence of this misrepresentation in Thucydides' treatment of Kleon. When four hundred Spartans were trapped on the little island of Sphakteria, the Athenians did not care to come to grips with these most dangerous of all Greek troops, and the attempt to starve them out had failed. Kleon in the Athenian assembly inveighed against the slackness of the generals: if he were in command he would wipe those Spartans out or bring them back as prisoners within twenty days. So the Athenians laughed, and made him general, and to their surprise he fulfilled his boast. Thucydides represents that boast as crazy and its fulfillment as a stroke of luck because for him, says Cornford, Kleon is the embodiment of the blind, unthinking Greed which lured his city into crime—Kleon's folly is essential to his dramatic role. Now in this particular case almost everyone, I think, would agree that Thucydides is guilty of misrepresentation. There was really nothing mad or even reckless in Kleon's idea that more than 10,000 light armed troops commanded by Athens' best general Demosthenes would be able to kill or capture some four hundred Spartans. But is Cornford's explanation the correct one? Kleon was a man of the people, violent in action and unrestrained in manner; moreover he had moved the decree which exiled Thucydides from Athens. The reserved and aristocratic historian must have disliked and may well have misjudged him. Personal prejudice is a more likely explanation of Thucydides' treatment of Kleon than any kind of literary manipulation. So, as Cornford is probably wrong in his chief argument, and as he obviously overstates his case in general, it is usual to shrug off or to ignore his attack. And yet it is hard to read the *History of the Peloponnesian War* without feeling that one is reading the Tragedy of Athens. If the book is history, it is certainly also literature; one can hardly deny that in some sense Kleon and Alkibiades embody the arrogant delusion of their city; and the defeat of Athens, when it comes, has the inevitability of tragedy. A work of literary genius necessarily seems to be less sober and accurate than a dry-as-dust chronicle, and Cornford, while he may not have substantiated his case, has certainly succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt.

Cornford maintained that Thucydides was first and foremost a tragedian, but few have agreed with him; the as-it-were opposite thesis, that Thucydides was primarily a scientist, in an almost modern sense of that

word, has won far wider support. Charles Cochrane, a generation ago, wrote a book of notable originality called *Thucydides and the Science of History*, and set forth there what is still one of the most widely known and accepted of all general estimates of Thucydides.⁵ Cochrane first notices that Thucydides' explanations are always sceptical and rationalistic, never superstitious, religious, or philosophic. He then compares Thucydides' account of the great plague at Athens with similar passages in the medical writings that have come down to us under the name of Hippokrates, and he finds in both the same attitude, the same kind of analysis, even the same technical terminology. He concludes that Thucydides was directly acquainted with the work of the great medical writers of the fifth century B.C. From them he learned profound respect for facts, distrust of any and all supernatural explanations, and a conviction that prognosis, or prediction, was the end of science, whether that science be of men or of things. Prediction in natural science is made possible by an understanding of natural law. Prediction in human affairs depends upon our understanding of human psychology. History discovers how men have in fact behaved in the past as a preliminary to considering how they will behave in the future, and Thucydides describes the ills of the body politic as "Hippokrates" describes those of the physical anatomy. This ultimately means that for Thucydides, and for all true historians, "history is really the equivalent of political science." So Cochrane thought.

There are many who agree with Cochrane about the political value and scientific character of historical knowledge, and Thucydides, I think, was one of them. Further investigation has only documented and substantiated Cochrane's thesis that Thucydides was deeply indebted to "Hippokrates." Indeed Page has shown in greater detail the debt that Thucydides owes to the terminology of the earliest Hippocratic treatises,⁶ and a few years ago Weidauer (who seems not to have read Cochrane's book) argued ably that Thucydides' history and the famous Hippocratic treatises on *Epidemics* are quasi-identical both in purpose and in method; indeed he concludes that the similarity is so great that we must suppose the two authors to have been personally acquainted, and he shows that this is both possible and probable.⁷ It is unfortunate that Weidauer did not realize how fully Cochrane had anticipated him, but their mutual thesis is all the stronger for the independence of its authors.

The means by which Thucydides brings his readers to see the facts as he saw them were made the subject a few years ago of the careful and interesting book by Mme de Romilly which was mentioned above. Her dissection has laid bare Thucydides' method. The intent, the plan, the

⁵*Thucydides and the Science of History* by C. N. Cochrane (Oxford 1929).

⁶CQ n.s.3 (1953) 98-110.

⁷*Thukydides und die Hippokratischen Schriften* by K. Weidauer (Heidelberg 1954).

purpose of every series of events—and this is equally true whether the events in question compose a skirmish, a battle, or the war itself—the underlying idea is suggested beforehand in a speech, in a remark about what naturally would or usually does happen under such circumstances, in some aside about how men always act. The reader has thus been prepared beforehand, the probable explanation has been suggested to him; there has been no blunt and partisan statement of the private opinion of Thucydides, but some reference to the invariable character of human behaviour, some cold and almost statistical generalisation about the usual result in such cases, thrown in as it were in an aside, has prepared his mind without arousing his opposition. So when he comes to the simple and apparently objective narrative of bare events, he knows at once what he thinks about them. And in case he has forgotten, in case his attention has lagged, the key words of the previous explanation, the very phrases which were used before, are quietly repeated in the exposition of events so carefully selected and so subtly coloured that every reader comes to the same conclusion about them, and comes convinced that he thought of it for himself. No totalitarian meeting of voters assembled to elect a single slate of candidates has ever been more unanimous than the readers of Thucydides in assessing the issues of the Peloponnesian War. The effect depends to a considerable extent upon what one may almost call subliminal persuasion, upon careful repetitions and echoes of words and phrases. It is probable that most of this does not reach the level of any reader's consciousness, but analysis of the text reveals the method, and its effectiveness is proved by the unanimity it has produced. Such a method of predigesting facts, such careful presentation of only the most palatable and nourishing provender, produces happy readers. Not for them the knitted brow, the puzzled mind. The drama hurries them along; they are in the grip of fear and pity; it would seem irrelevant to ask if that is really exactly how it happened.

It is curious that no one, so far as I know, has emphasized (although many have mentioned) what seems to me the most serious of Thucydides' shortcomings as an historian; this is simply that he never tells us his sources, and that he never justifies his opinions. The implication is, indeed he expressly says, that he has taken great pains to discover the truth, and those who wish to know it may read his book. I think it did not occur to him as possible that any serious student would ever really consider him mistaken, and try to establish the truth of a different view from his. Of course one cannot ask for footnotes in the modern manner—for one thing there were no pages on which they could sink unobtrusively to the bottom, and for another the ancients did not read books quietly to themselves, they read them aloud, and usually in company. But even in ancient Greece it was possible to treat one's audience with respect, one

did not have to regard oneself as infallible. Indeed Herodotos, who was a generation older than Thucydides, had already shown what was the proper attitude for the historian. "I regard it," said Herodotos, "as my duty to report what men say, but I certainly do not have to believe it all." And when he does not believe a report, he tells you why. One instance will suffice of Herodotos' peculiar and valuable honesty. He tells how the Egyptian pharaoh Necho once sent some Phoenicians south along the coast of Africa with orders to keep the land upon their right, and to return to Egypt through the Pillars of Herakles.⁸ Herodotos did not realize the difficulty of this assignment, for he thought that Africa extended less far to the south than Arabia. In the third year the Phoenicians reappeared claiming that they had done as they were told, and adding (here I quote Herodotos) "what others may believe but I do not, that as they sailed around the sun at noon was on their right." Herodotos did not believe it, and neither, later on, did Aristotle, but we do; no one then knew anything about the southern hemisphere, and that accurate observation—that the sun at noon was *north* of the zenith—could hardly have been invented. The story which Herodotos thought silly but considered it his duty to tell is to us sufficient evidence that some Phoenician ships really did circumnavigate Africa about 600 B.C. Thus one can read between the lines of Herodotos' history, while one must accept Thucydides' account. But the modern reader, quite rightly, does not care to read history as he reads a novel. He does not wish to accept everything he is told; his own judgment is not in suspense; he demands that doubtful points should be discussed, and that serious difficulties should be indicated. Perhaps few historians of any period fully satisfy these requirements, but Thucydides is unaware of their existence.

In this brief survey of opinion about Thucydides I have discussed only those views which seem to me to contain considerable elements of truth. I have no doubt that the study of fifth-century inscriptions, and of Thucydides' own text, will persuade any careful student that while his facts are extremely accurate as far as they go, his omissions are shocking and incredible, that he has recorded only what seemed to him important on some principle quite different from any which an historian would adopt to-day, for it involves the omission of almost everything not directly connected with actual military events. Curiously enough this military fixation is not incompatible with a strong sense of drama, and I think that too little attention has been paid to Cornford's view that Thucydides has selected and arranged his facts to present what every reader recognises as *The Tragedy of Athens*. I have no doubt that Cochrane is perfectly right in considering Thucydides a natural scientist in his recording of facts, and a political scientist in his interpretation of

⁸Her. 4.42.2-4.

them. Mme de Romilly, and Professor Bodin, with whom she worked, have analysed the inevitability of Thucydides' narrative, the impossibility of interpreting the war in any other way than his, and have shown that "one is with him closer to rhetoric than to logic," that in a sense persuasion here takes precedence of truth. And finally I have confessed my own feeling that it is somehow not quite respectable to give one's readers as little choice as Thucydides gives his, that an historian should recognise that other views than his own may perhaps be possible. But what kind of unity can there be which underlies meticulous accuracy, dramatic power, preoccupation with scientific law, and the arrogant conditioning of one's readers' minds? For all these things, I think, are characteristic of Thucydides.

It seems to me that R. G. Collingwood, in two pages of his *Idea of History*, has come closer to a synthesis of Thucydides' peculiarities, to an understanding of his apparent contradictions, than anyone else who has written about him.⁹ To put the matter very briefly, Collingwood thinks that Thucydides felt, with the philosophers of his time, that knowledge was only possible of the permanent, that particular events have no importance in themselves, and that the intelligent man will concern himself only with the laws or principles according to which they happen. Thus the investigation of particular events, the discovery of what actually did occur, probably seemed to Thucydides, as it must have seemed to Plato, to be a matter of little importance, an unintellectual pursuit. Thucydides, says Collingwood, has a bad conscience, for while writing history he tries to pretend that it is something else. His elaborate speeches, twisted and distorted in their Greek, reflect the determination of the author to win his way through the tangle of events to the ultimate and intelligible reality which he feels must lie behind them. It is a reality which, I think, he never found. A will o' the wisp which led him, as it has led other great historians, into the bog of pseudo-explanation, the kind of explanation which has made some see in history gold, silver, bronze, and iron age cycles, or preparation for the return of the Messiah, or the patterned rise and fall of civilisations. It is to Thucydides' credit that he never made explicit the explanation towards which he obviously felt that he was making his way. In the humble and honest manner of the Hippocratic doctors, but also with their implicit faith that what they wrote would some day be understood, he set forth the particulars of the case he was describing, disentangled its symptoms, and underlined its tendencies. He never doubted that, as a careful and accurate case history, his work would take its place in the ultimate *Principia Medica* of mankind. He thought, to paraphrase his own words, that while the tales of Herodotos were well calculated to fill an idle moment pleasantly, his own

⁹*The Idea of History* by R. G. Collingwood (Oxford 1946) 28-31.

history would be a permanent possession of mankind—permanent surely because it would be part of the Science of Man.

Thucydides wrote with accuracy and with insight one of the great books of all time; it would be foolish to underestimate or to belittle his achievement. But history, whatever it is—and that is a question which must be left to the philosophers—history is surely *not* the discovery of scientific law, it is certainly something different from political science, and the catharsis which reading it may produce in the reader is essentially irrelevant. The historian should give such background as is necessary for the understanding of the events which he records. And surely no historian should ask others to accept on faith and without question what he himself believes to be the true account, however sure he may be that he is right. Thucydides took greater pains to discover the truth than any other ancient historian (except, no doubt, Polybios), and infinitely greater pains to set that truth clearly and convincingly before his readers. But he has a better right, I think, to be called a true scientist, a great tragedian, and a brilliant writer, than to be called, quite simply and strictly, an historian.