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The Personality of Thucydides

By G. W. BOWERSOCK

■ The austerity of a cold and detached intellect, it is often alleged, characterizes that massive prose fragment, the *History* of Thucydides. Contrasts are drawn between the amiable Herodotus and his younger contemporary, an innovatory practitioner of scientific historiography. Eschewing personal reminiscences, Thucydides did not even attempt to justify his own military failure at Amphipolis, a failure which led to twenty years in exile. A lecture series on "master minds" recently found a place for Thucydides,¹ and rightly; it was a stupendous mind, subtle and relentless. But a mind or an intellect cannot exist without a man, and austerity is rarely total. In the case of Thucydides it is much less than convenient generalizations would suggest.

An illustration will show this at once. In the summer of 413 a band of Thracian mercenaries, arriving in Athens too late for service in Sicily, returned home under the leadership of a certain Diitrephes. Thucydides recorded their journey north: when they came into Boeotia, they fell upon the unprotected town of Mycalessus, which had never anticipated this chance arrival of barbarous soldiers. In the words of Thucydides:

They sacked the homes and temples, and they slaughtered the people,

¹In 1960: the lectures in this series appear in the *Proceedings* of the British Academy.

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sparing neither old nor young but killing all indiscriminately, women and children, even beasts of burden and whatever they saw alive . . . There was great turmoil and every form of ruin: they fell upon a children's school, which was the largest there and into which the children had just come, and they cut down every one of them. No city suffered any disaster worse than this, unexpected as it was and horrible.

This final comment is that of a man who had recorded the hideous fates of Scione, Hysiae, and Melos, and who was in his narrative moving toward the Athenian catastrophe at Syracuse. Some measure of horror is inevitable in war, but the acts of the Thracians at Mycalessus were unnecessary and not a part of the struggle between Athens and Sparta. Innocent children, normally spared, perished. This is surely the explanation of that compassionate utterance of Thucydides, who stands revealed without austerity.

The personality of the man calls for attention. A recent writer, in the preface to an excellent paperback volume,² has stated that in his view Thucydides agreed fundamentally with the Athenians' brutal doctrine of power as expounded in the Melian Dialogue. That is going too far, and perhaps some reconsiderations would be helpful to our understanding. For one thing, an assessment of personality will provide some control over the vexed question of the speeches. As every conscientious reader of the *History* is aware, Thucydides' own pronouncement about its composition is oddly at variance with his practice. Such a discrepancy is disturbing in an author deemed austere, rigorously scientific, not to say infallible—there would be less cause for alarm in a writer more human.

Little enough is known of Thucydides' life, but what there is ought not to be neglected. The information he gives us himself is briefly assembled: When the Peloponnesian War broke out in 431 he was sufficiently old to comprehend it, and he began then to take notes, for he realized that the war would be the greatest upheaval yet to disturb the Greek world. In the following year he fell victim to the plague which devastated Athens; fortunately he recovered and was able to observe with care the symptoms in others. In 424 he served as general at Amphipolis, which lay in a part of Thrace where he had inherited certain mining interests from his father, Olorus. Because

²P. A. Brunt on p. xxxi of the *Thucydides* published by the Washington Square Press.

of his tardiness at a crucial moment, Thucydides was responsible for the capitulation of Amphipolis to the enemy, and shortly afterwards he was exiled from Athens for twenty years.

These meager details, which suggest Thucydides' intimate involvement in the affairs about which he wrote, can be supplemented with a few scraps from elsewhere, notably some late biographies. The tomb of Thucydides at Athens (just possibly a cenotaph) was to be found among graves of the family of Cimon, the great fifth-century conservative political leader. This fact coheres neatly with Thucydides' own testimony that his father's name was Olorus; for Cimon on his mother's side was the grandson of a Thracian monarch of that name, and the name, as was the custom, had probably descended in the dynasty. There is no reason to question the Cimonian attachments of the historian; nor was he the only Thucydides in that family. As we know from the pamphlet on the Athenian constitution which has been transmitted under the name of Aristotle, Cimon's role as leader of the upper class conservatives was taken over at his death by a kinsman, one Thucydides the son of Melesias. This Thucydides was the principal opponent of Pericles until an ostracism in 443 removed him from Athens for at least ten years, possibly forever.

Such is the information available about the background of Thucydides the historian. Clearly the milieu from which he emerged was aristocratic and conservative, or, rather, what hostile Athenians would have called oligarchic. He belonged to a family which could be fairly described as anti-Periclean and provided not surprisingly Pericles' greatest antagonist. Yet, as any reader of the *History* can never forget, Thucydides the historian was, for posterity at least, Pericles' greatest panegyrist.

Here is a case of political conversion, of breaking with family tradition. Thucydides was young when Pericles was at his zenith, the decade in which the Parthenon was completed, and in which Athens was led with masterly resolution and electrifying oratory into war. There is a fine indication of Pericles' impact in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, "Then in rage Pericles the Olympian with thunder and lightning confounded Greece" (530-531). The youth of the city flocked to this *stupor mundi* as he persuaded the Athenians not to yield on any point to the insistent demands of the enemy.

Thucydides observed that many young men in Athens were eager for war because they did not know what it was like, and it is probable that he was speaking for himself.

The conversion to Pericles' views does not mean that Thucydides became an outright democrat. In his eulogy of Pericles in Book II, the democracy of the 430's is described as "a democracy in name, but in fact the rule of the first man." And he makes no secret in that passage of his hostility to the political successors of Pericles, demagogues who subverted his policies and undermined the fortunes of the city. The truth is that the form of democracy for which Thucydides abandoned his family politics was distinguished by its conservatism. Although he could not bear the radical democracy, one should not conclude that he was therefore an oligarch. In fact, there is no reason to think that he returned to his family's politics. The matter is much more delicate. After Pericles, the only other government which Thucydides deemed worthy of praise was the Constitution of the Five Thousand, excogitated by Theramenes in 411. This was "a moderate mixture of democracy and oligarchy," under which, says Thucydides, the Athenians for the first time in his day had a good constitution. In the 430's Pericles had made the constitution work by running things himself, but in 411 the constitution was good. Or so Thucydides opined. What best explains his opinion is perhaps the political uncertainty which inevitably resulted from the conversion of a born conservative to a democracy which lost its attraction after the death of the leader who had impressed him. From 429 he was, so to speak, an "independent," thoughtful but unsure.

Small wonder that Thucydides' account of internal politics at Athens shows neither that objectivity nor austerity with which he is so often credited. He was convinced that the demagogues who followed Pericles contributed through their self-seeking to the collapse of the wise policies that marked the opening of the war. Something of those demagogues is known, including their names: Lysicles, Cleonymus, Cleon, Hyperbolus, and Androcles—to mention persons active within the period covered by Thucydides' *History* as it survives. Yet of these five, only one actually appears in the work as subverting the Periclean plan, and that is Cleon. By contrast, Lysicles and Androcles are both mentioned briefly and without particular

feeling, while Cleonymus, that notorious target of Aristophanes, is not mentioned at all. A passing allusion to Hyperbolus makes it plain that Thucydides did not like him, but nothing more; a reader of Thucydides would find it hard to comprehend why Hyperbolus went into exile as the victim of the last ostracism to take place at Athens.

Although it has occasionally been fashionable to deny it, Thucydides loathed Cleon. This was the man who made the "insane promise" to finish off the Pylos business in twenty days—sensible people would have been glad to be rid of him. This was the man considered a compound of ignorance and cowardice by his own soldiers, it was said—the man who preferred war to peace so that his wickedness might not be so conspicuous. Such is Thucydides' portrait of Cleon; and it is the product of strong prejudice. When an objective reader encounters Thucydides' explanation of Cleon's preference for war, he will be reminded of a parallel which Thucydides takes care nowhere to mention: Pericles himself was said by his detractors to have brought on the Peloponnesian War to conceal his own embarrassments and those of his friends. An explanation of Thucydides' animus against Cleon may be found in a note of a late biographer (Marcellinus) to the effect that Cleon was responsible for Thucydides' exile. It is certain at least that Thucydides was banished in 424, a year in which Cleon was still enjoying the success of Pylos. Cleon was for Thucydides an anti-Pericles, representing the kind of democracy he disliked, the democracy which exiled him. In the Mytilenean Debate the speech of Cleon contains precise verbal echoes of Thucydides' Pericles, but very different is the sentiment that government is best left in the hands of inferior and unintelligent people.

Alcibiades, no less than Pericles and Cleon, aroused in Thucydides emotions that betray his political uncertainty. Thucydides' attitude to Alcibiades was thoroughly ambiguous; it is as if Alcibiades could have been a second Pericles but was not. Intelligent, aristocratic and beautiful, he might have been numbered among the *kaloi kagathoi*, yet his private life was extravagant, his ambitions colossal. All this was well known to Thucydides, as he made plain in Book VI; but he went on to observe that as a statesman Alcibiades acted well, indeed that the fortunes of Athens might have been salvaged if

Alcibiades had not been deprived of his authority. It appears, therefore, that in those latter years of the war the democracy could have been managed in a way Thucydides approved of, but the democracy in its worst aspect—in its suspicion and fickleness—prevented this from happening. Alcibiades was driven to treason and subversion, in Sparta and Ionia, before his return to Athens in 407 and second dismissal in the following year. For Thucydides, born a Cimonian and converted to Periclean democracy, the failure of Alcibiades meant the failure of Athens. One might profitably recall the melancholy question on which hangs the outcome of the competition between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*: "What do you think of Alcibiades?" (1422-23) This play was produced in 405, the year of Aegospotami. Such a question at such a time would not have aroused much mirth.

The political sentiments of Thucydides were thus delicately balanced. In view of this, an item in Book VIII about Antiphon the oligarch can be properly appreciated, for it has too often been adduced out of context to prove that Thucydides favored oligarchy. Thucydides described Antiphon as second to none of his day in virtue (*arete*) and exceptional in his ability to form plans and give expression to them. Thucydides' political commitments were, as has been shown, sufficiently independent for him to admire quality in a superior oligarch quite as much as in a superior democrat. It would be salutary to notice in Book IV Thucydides' ascription to Brasidas of virtue (*arete*) and intelligence (*xunesis*), essentially the same two characteristics that Antiphon had; again, in Book VI the words *arete* and *xunesis* are used of the Peisistratid tyrants. No sane reader would infer from these passages that Thucydides was either pro-Spartan or pro-tyrant. Why then should his remark about Antiphon prove him an oligarch?

The foregoing inquiry into the political attitudes of Thucydides reveals how personal they were and to what extent both conservative and liberal opinions impinged upon them. Herein lies the explanation of Thucydides' preoccupation with civil conflict (*stasis*). It has been observed before that he was the Western world's first historian of the class struggle, and there is scarcely anyone to dispute that his account of revolution at Corcyra is the most profound and searching analysis of *stasis* ever written. Throughout his *History*

Thucydides was constantly aware of the presence of factions and the potential danger of their clashes. The actual narrative of the Peloponnesian War begins with the clash at Epidamnus between the "few" (*oligoi*) and the "many" (*polloi*), or, as they were sometimes called, the "powerful" (*dunatoi*) and the "people" (*demos*). Similar clashes are described at Thebes, Plataea, Colophon, Mytilene, Samos, to name only some. The clash at Syracuse is dramatized in the confrontation of Hermocrates and Athenagoras in Book VI; at Athens the struggles between the few and the many erupted in the oligarchic revolution of 411, so vividly described in Book VIII. When one considers Thucydides' experience of both sides and the ambiguous and uncertain political position in which he found himself, it becomes at once clear why *stasis* dominated his view of history.

In the course of time democracy and oligarchy alike had impressed and disillusioned Thucydides. Yet quite apart from their intrinsic merits as constitutions, they had become established, for good or ill, as instruments of empire. In the cities of the Greek world the many looked to Athens for support and the few to Sparta, and on the whole those two cities saw to it that the appropriate constitution in each case was imposed upon their allies. And so *stasis* at Athens had, by virtue of her vast empire, far-ranging repercussions.

Thucydides sought to understand. As he must have learned from his own experience, the answers lay with the men who made history: it was human nature which had to be understood. The medical writers of the school of Hippocrates had been analyzing the workings of the body and its diseases. Adapting their techniques and using the force of his own genius, Thucydides analyzed the workings of men in society and of society's diseases. In short, he applied the Hippocratic method to human nature, and the reason he did so was ultimately personal.

Thucydides analyzed the causes of the war in two parts: the complaints which precipitated it and the true underlying cause. This analysis was an attempt to see beyond the facts; the real cause of war, he tells us, was Spartan fear of the growing power of Athens, although men did not speak of it openly at the time. Thucydides is here a psychologist, a reader of minds. So is he again when in Book II he deals with the plague and its impact upon the character

of the Athenians: those who recovered acquired false confidence that no disease would ever carry them away, while those who were dying abandoned every scruple and indulged in those pleasures which they had hitherto professed they abjured. Thucydides' terrifying account of the state of men's souls in the summer of 430 occurs together with a description of the plague symptoms, a clear indication of Hippocratic techniques applied psychologically as well as physiologically. And the social collapse of Athens in 430 was matched by the situation at Corcyra a few years later. In the celebrated passage on the Corcyraean *stasis*, Thucydides the psychologist was again at work, probing and reading minds. He noted the vanishing of all scruples, before human laws and before the gods, and he unravelled the new senses of old words used in a time of crisis. In Books IV and V, with a prejudiced passion, Thucydides can be seen reading the mind of Cleon: he had not expected that Nicias would turn over the command to him; he wanted war instead of peace so that his own baseness would be less obvious. In these expository passages, and others like them, Thucydides shows himself eager to penetrate the surface of actual events.

The effort to discern and analyze inner truth is apparent within the speeches in Thucydides as well as outside them. If Thucydides was an author less objective than is often alleged, he might well be expected to intrude something of his own thought into the speeches. And so indeed he seems to have done if one ignores his own description of his practice as given in Book I, chapter 22. That single chapter has provoked controversy for a long time. Much has been said about the chronology of the *History's* composition; and inconsistencies, omissions, and changes of emphasis have been explained away by assumptions of different dates of composition. Yet, in the midst of this controversy, the twenty-second chapter of Book I has remained sacrosanct.

In that chapter Thucydides mentions the difficulty of recalling precisely what was said in speeches that he himself had heard and of obtaining from others a reliable report of speeches which he had not heard. However, he asserts that when he composed the speeches in his *History* he "kept as close as possible to the general purport (*gnome*) of what was actually said"; furthermore, his speakers were made to say what was appropriate for the occasion (*ta deonta*).

No one knows the date of this obscure statement of intention, and it is by no means clear what *ta deonta* would be. The sense of *gnome* is difficult, but Thucydides' words certainly mean that the speeches in his *History* are to be taken as very close approximations of the original utterances. That can hardly be the case. Fantastic ingenuity is vainly exercised on reconciling Thucydides' statement with the speeches in his work. And it requires an even more fantastic ingenuity to maintain, as a few scholars do, that every speech in Thucydides is completely historical. Think of the Melian Dialogue. How much better it is to admit that Thucydides has not done what he intended to do. After all, in the same chapter, he lays great stress on accuracy (*akribeia*); yet he is not always accurate, and in certain instances important material is simply left out. In these matters it is essential to consider what manner of man Thucydides was, what peculiarly animated him and diverted him from his scientific aims.

Not that the speeches are all unhistorical—far from it: there were undoubtedly congresses at Sparta (although Thucydides would not have heard what was said there), and Pericles undoubtedly did address the Athenian people (on more occasions than those Thucydides mentions). The speeches probably do contain—some more than others—an admixture of genuine historical material. A contemporary pamphlet, usually ascribed to an “old oligarch,” includes several of the arguments in favor of empire advanced by Pericles in his first speech in Thucydides. Pericles' exhortation in the Funeral Oration—that Athenians should become lovers (*erastai*) of their city—probably comes from Pericles himself, to judge from several parodies of this remark in two early plays of Aristophanes. But the one quotation we possess from the actual oration is nowhere to be found in Thucydides, although it is singularly effective: “The youth has been taken from the city, as if the spring were taken from the year.” It has, moreover, been ably demonstrated that certain features of sophistic argument in Thucydides' speeches may reflect contemporary rhetoric. But such historical ingredients do not suffice to support the notion that Thucydides kept *as close as possible* to the general purport of the originals.

Human nature, social disorder, the struggle for power—these are the topics that engaged Thucydides, and they occur insistently

in the speeches. A culminative proof of their fundamentally Thucydidean character can be had first from the recurrence of notions to be found in Thucydides' own analyses, second from the recurrence of similar points in unrelated speeches, and third from the stylistic similarity of the speeches and the analytic digressions.

Some examples can be advanced under these several rubrics. First, commentators have often been troubled by Thucydides' assertion that the basic cause of the war, namely, Spartan fear of Athens' growing power, was not a matter openly talked about and that discussion centered upon the various pretexts for war. And yet it is precisely that basic cause which is discussed in several of the speeches in Book I. This manifest contradiction shows immediately that Thucydides used the speeches as vehicles of interpretation and analysis. There can be no objection to postulating different dates of composition for those speeches and for Thucydides' remark, although the actual dates will be forever elusive. But hypotheses about times of composition are not nearly so valuable as the simple evidence that Thucydides introduced his own views into certain speeches.

There is other evidence of the same kind. Thucydides' preoccupation with the nature of man is amply attested in passages written in his own person. He said in his preface that his book would be useful because similar events will, human nature being what it is, occur again; and on the Corcyraean Revolution he observed that *stasis* would continue to occur in various forms "as long as human nature is the same." Compare with this the comment assigned to Diodotus that human nature is a more potent force than anything else. Later, in the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians declare that it is in the nature of man to rule wherever possible. These passages in speeches are no less Thucydidean than the others.

The folly of hope was another obsession of Thucydides. It is a motif with a long pedigree in Greek thought. Solon had once written how men take pleasure in "empty hopes"; in recording the plague, Thucydides wrote that those who recovered "somehow clung to an empty hope that no other disease would destroy them." In his account of the fall of Amphipolis in Book IV, he noted that men were addicted to hoping irrationally for whatever they most wanted. Compare Diodotus on ruinous hope, or better still the

Athenians at Melos on "hope, a comfort in danger," which is only recognized for what it is when the time for precaution has passed. "Hope," according to Pericles' third speech, "derives its strength from despair."

To turn to the second rubric. A glance at the speeches, taken together and without reference to Thucydides' own remarks, is instructive: there is a coherence which is not historical. In his first speech in the *History*, Pericles is seen to reply point by point to objections raised in the speech of the Corinthians at the second congress at Sparta. At Melos the Athenians enunciate their brutal doctrine that power is inevitably in the hands of the stronger, but the idea has already appeared in the Athenian speech at Sparta in Book I, quite as clearly if less fully. Observe the concept of "example" (*paradeigma*) which suggests, in a way, the whole tragic story of Athens' fall. In the Funeral Oration Pericles describes the Athenians as "themselves a *paradeigma* for the world rather than imitators of others," but in the dialogue at Melos the Melians advise the Athenians to leave them alone: "This is no less in your interest than ours, for were you ever to be defeated you would become a *paradeigma* to others in view of the enormous vengeance which would be wrought upon you." For the Athenians, however, "Hatred is a *paradeigma* of power in the eyes of the ruled." Between the Funeral Oration and the Melian Debate comes the revolt of Mytilene; in both the speech of the Mytileneans at Olympia and the antilogy at Athens a *paradeigma* for the ruled is explicitly at issue.

Finally, style too shows the speeches as vehicles of analysis. Every reader of Thucydides' Greek will have discovered that the most difficult passages are precisely the disquisitions, as on the plague or Corcyra, and the speeches. The actual narrative is generally much simpler. Analysis, with its abstractions and subtleties, demanded a tougher style. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing in Greek under Augustus, vehemently attacked Thucydides for (among other things) the excessive difficulty and obscurity of his language: the passages which bothered him were the speeches, but also—and especially—the account of *stasis* at Corcyra.

Thus the coherence of style and substance betrays the man Thucydides, striving with prejudice, passion, and compassion, to understand his own experience. R. G. Collingwood once stated on a

much read page of *The Idea of History*: "In reading Thucydides I ask myself, what is the matter with the man that he writes like that? I answer: he has a bad conscience." No, it was a superb conscience. There was much to explain: the plague-ridden Athenians hurling themselves into wells, the fathers who slaughtered their children at Corcyra, the soldiers' blood that stained the waters of the Assinarus. There was much to learn: war, as Thucydides said, is a "violent teacher."



Futility

By AISOPOS

translated by WILLIS BARNSTONE

How can we escape from you, life, except through
death?

Our sorrows are endless. Endure? Escape? Neither
is easy.

Yes, the beauty of nature is sweet—the earth,
sea, stars,

the orbit of the moon and sun.

But all else is fear and pain.

One day a bit of luck

and then we wait for inexorable Nemesis.