‘A Possession for All Time’? Why and how Thucydides still matters

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I begin with a question: why has Thucydides forever been virtually unknown to the general public, but of such overpowering significance to those few who have read him closely?

In ancient times many Greeks and Romans found Thucydides almost inaccessible because of the difficulty of his text. In our time I have discovered that when people introduce me to a broad audience and cite my scholarly work or interests, they often can’t even pronounce the historian’s name, not simply because it is difficult to pronounce, but because they have never heard of him. Unlike Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles and Euripides, Thucydides is not a household name.

On the other hand, in antiquity Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* dominated and shaped the writing of history for centuries, and became the model of Western historiography through the Renaissance. In modern times, he has had a deep influence on the thinking of elite minds like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and, in the 20th century, the poet W.H. Auden, and political and military leaders such as George Marshall. Why does this chasm exist in Thucydides-reception between popular audience and elite reader?

Part of the answer to this question is simple: Thucydides wanted it this way. He is one of the few authors in history to state explicitly in the beginning of his work that he writes ONLY for the elite, not for the common person. Let’s look at his programmatic statement in Book I, chapter 22, a copy of which you have in front of you. After describing his historiographical method, Thucydides says: “the lack of traditional stories in my history will, perhaps, appear rather unenjoyable for listening to a reading of it. But if those (few) who will want to study the clear truth of what happened, and will happen again in similar form, given the human condition, judge my work useful, that will suffice for my purposes. For it is composed rather as an acquisition for repeated reading than as a prize composition to be read just once.” (I take the last sentence differently from the common rendering, but do not have time now to argue for this interpretation).

These statements clearly signal that Thucydides wrote only for serious readers willing to give much time and close attention to his text, and desirous of studying what his history can teach them about the events of their own time.

Why does anyone intentionally eschew a wide readership? First, as is clear from these remarks, Thucydides held a low opinion of “average readers,” those who seek pleasure, not historical understanding. For most Greeks of his time, “reading” meant listening to an author recite his work orally to a few friends on the spot. It was a

passive exercise in oral and aural enjoyment, not active and engaged thinking about an intricately fashioned text designed to convey deep lessons about human conduct.

Secondly, Thucydides knew very well that by writing about a major war, he was competing with two remarkably popular predecessors, Homer and Herodotus. They had described two earlier conflicts in which Greeks defeated barbarians, respectively the Trojan War and the Persian Wars. Thucydides, on the other hand, chose to compose the history of a brutal contemporary war in which Greeks killed Greeks and brought enormous suffering upon themselves. Rather than an encomium to Greek heroism, the *Peloponnesian War* is testimony to man's inhumanity to man, and a vivid portrait of the disintegration of values that hold civilization together. Thucydides did not believe that "War as tragedy" would make him popular.

Two other characteristics make Thucydides' work appeal to a narrow, elite audience. As Paul Shorey pointed out 120 years ago, Thucydides' history is marked by two fundamental elements: ethical positivism and intellectualism. The first is Thucydides' belief that all our actions are governed by an overriding constant called "human nature," comprising our basic drives and motivations. These are, in the historian's reckoning, discoverable in history, and they are essentially selfish: fear, ambition, profit, competitive advantage, expediency.

The second element, intellectualism, constitutes Thucydides' analytical and rhetorical method of uncovering those real motives by peeling off the layer of pretence and deceit that men use to hide their real motives from the world. This semantic and syntactic penetration occurs on every page, almost in every sentence of Thucydides' text: he constantly contrasts word and deed, separates specious claim from genuine motive, distinguishes the professed rationale from the real. In reading Thucydides, we find ourselves immersed in a world of analysis, of logical relationships that require us to weigh evidence, to divine motives, to balance probabilities, to assign causes. As Shorey said, "the fundamental assumption of his ethical positivism is that the nature and conduct of man are strictly determined by his physical and social environment and by a few elementary appetites and desires." The fundamental result of his analysis is that we, his close and engaged readers, learn to penetrate the conventions and decorous pretences man has wrapped about himself in order to conceal his core self, his true nature. In Thucydides' view, the common man is duped by this moral drapery. The wise man is not deceived: he pierces the cover and exposes the core.

In so doing, the elite reader sees war for what it is: the disintegration of society, of popular morality, of traditional ethics, of language, finally of civilization itself. This is the meaning of war, the lesson of Thucydides. As one of his ancient commentators said, Thucydides' history is "philosophy teaching by examples." It constitutes a record of patterns, paradigms of human behavior under stress. Thucydides clearly believed that good readers could learn from his history and thereby interpret what was happening in their own day since it would not be different, in kind, from what he recorded. Human nature is not pretty, and it does not change.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the first acute readers of Thucydides in modern times was Thomas Hobbes, who paid the historian the ultimate homage of translating his entire work into English. This was an extraordinary task in Hobbes' day, given the difficulty of Thucydides' Greek, the dearth of other translations in English, and the lack of commentaries and other such aids. Hobbes not only took on this Herculean task at a relatively young age (in his 30s), but spent years at it, and fulfilled it brilliantly when he published his work in 1628. His translation is still among the best in English and evinces a close, highly intellectual engagement with the text. Hobbes clearly valued Thucydides' vigorous prose, sophisticated rhetoric, and deep thought. That he was proud of the product is obvious from the title Hobbes chose for his opus: "8 Books of the Peloponnesian War written by Thucydides son of Olorus interpreted with faith and diligence *immediately* out of the Greek by Thomas Hobbes." (my italics—Hobbes signaled his readers that he did not work from a Latin or French version, but from Thucydides' own Greek)

In the afterword to his translation ("On the life and history of Thucydides" p. 584), Hobbes vigorously contests the ancient criticism that Thucydides' Greek is "obscure": "the obscurity that is, proceedeth from the profoundness of the sentences, containing contemplations of those human passions, which either dissembled or not commonly discoursed of, do yet carry the greatest sway with men in their public conversation…. For a wise man should so write … that wise men only should be able to commend him… In the characters of men's humours and manners, and applying them to affairs of consequence: it is impossible not to be obscure to ordinary capacities, in what words soever a man deliver his mind. If therefore Thucydides in his orations, or in the description of a sedition, or other thing of that kind, be not easily understood; it is of those only that cannot penetrate into the nature of such things, and proceedeth not from any intricacy of expression."

Here Hobbes makes the same point Shorey did in the remarks I quote before: Thucydides writes his history for those few readers educated and attentive enough to read it with profit. It is this characteristic of the *Peloponnesian War* that Hobbes finds congenial to his own thought. And Hobbes said so in no uncertain terms when he published his autobiography at the age of 84 (1672). That work, composed in Latin verse, contains the following lines:

Sed mihi prae reliquis Thucydides placuit.
Is Democratia ostendit mihi quam sit inepta
Et quantum coetu plus sapit unus homo.
Hunc ego scriptorem verti, qui diceret Anglis,
Consultaturi rhetores ut fugerent.

"… that he might tell the English they should shun the politicians they were about to consult."

The significant aspect of Thucydides' influence over Hobbes is not, then, so much that Hobbes borrowed this idea or that in writing the *Leviathan* or his other philosophical works, though one can certainly make the case that Hobbes took much from Thuc. 1.76.2, where the Athenians declare that the three essential motivations in human nature are "fear, ambition, and profit." More significant, I think, is the fact that Hobbes found Thucydides' sophisticated rhetoric and penetrating analysis of human nature pertinent to, and productive of, his own philosophical and political program. Only a few profound minds can expose mankind's hidden passions and dissembled motives, and they must aim at a limited, elite audience. It is not surprising that Hobbes, in citing examples of Thucydidean penetrations, singles out "the description of sedition:" that is a clear reference to Book III, chapters 82-85, Thucydides' great deconstruction of the nature of civil war, in which political leaders and their followers willfully change the relationship between words and deeds, thus altering human values for factional advantage. This was a theme close to Hobbes's heart as well as to his mind, given that he lived through the English Civil War and all its horrors. No wonder, then, that he later attributed his translation of Thucydides to his desire to warn the English about the risks inherent in trusting popular political leaders, and about the ineptness of democracy and the ignorance of the common crowd.

In the next century David Hume took up the Thucydidean mantle. In *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, published in 1752, Hume minces no words: "The first page of Thucydides is, in my opinion, the commencement of real history. All preceding narrations are so intermixed with fable, that philosophers ought to abandon them, in a great measure, to the embellishment of poets and orators." ("Of the populousness of ancient nations," II, xi. 98). At nearly the same time, Hume published his *An Enquiry concerning human understanding* (1748-51), in which he wrote this credo:

> It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action

> and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them. (Ed. by Selby-Biggs, 3rd ed. 83 f.)

It is hard to believe that Hume's fundamental claim about the constancy of human nature and the purpose of studying history does not derive, at least in part, from Thucydides. From his view that human nature obeys laws, just as nature does, Hume derived other dicta, such as his famous idea that "politics can be reduced to a science." In fact, one could point to the fundamental tenet of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy that the constancy of human nature allows for the scientific study of man in his various dimensions, social, economic, and political. Hume in turn had an enormous impact on James Madison as he developed the ideas that led to American Constitutional government. But that is too big a design for this brief paper to sketch.

Instead, I want merely to point to Hume's telling reflection on Thucydides' description of civil war in Book III, the same passage to which Hobbes referred above. "The utmost energy of the nervous style of THUCYDIDES, and the copiousness and expression of the GREEK language, seem to sink under that historian, when he attempts to describe the disorders, which arose from faction throughout all the GRECIAN commonwealths. You would imagine, that he still labours with a thought greater than he can find words to communicate. And he concludes his pathetic description with an observation, which is at once refined and solid. "In these contests," says he, "those who were the dullest, and most stupid, and had the least foresight, commonly prevailed. For being conscious of this weakness, and dreading to be overreached by those of greater penetration, they went to work hastily, without premeditation, by the sword and poinard, and thereby got the start of their antagonists, who were forming fine schemes and projects for their destruction." (II.xi.66) Like Hobbes, Hume singles out this analysis of revolution for special mention because it burrows beneath the surface of social and political life, distinguishes elite and common elements of the population, and exposes the wellsprings of human behavior. And, Hume astutely remarks, this analysis depends upon Thucydides' use of language itself: it is a "nervous style," energetic and expressive, and still almost not equal to the task of conveying the deep thought it exposes. Like Hobbes again, Hume grasps the essence of Thucydidean thought: the troubled, often perverse relationship between word and deed.

In the 20th century, a poet saw through this Thucydidean thicket. On the very eve of World War II W. H. Auden wrote his ominous poem "September 1, 1939." Having just left England for America, he begins this way:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire

Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Auden's epithet for Thucydides is "exiled." Auden was himself an exile in September, 1939, having just left Great Britain for America, so this adjective helps us grasp why the poet looked to the Greek historian for understanding in that year. Auden knew that he was about to witness terrible events *as they happened*, just as Thucydides had 2500 years before. Reading Thucydides was a *contemporary experience,* a window into one's own time. In 1939 Auden and many others saw Europe, and for that matter, the world, disintegrating before their eyes. As Samuel Hynes has cogently said of the poetry Auden wrote in 1940, Auden was focused on the following questions: "how to think historically about present disaster," "how to be an artist in a bad time." The liberal Western conception of man must be wrong in fundamental ways; or, more than wrong, *dead*. This death represented the failure of an entire culture's ideology, a subject on which Thucydides is perhaps the quintessential expert. As Hynes said, "To try to understand what has come upon us

and why, may not be the most heroic of the tasks required to save civilization, but it is indispensable."

Auden concluded, famously, that "Poetry makes nothing happen." In the face of the atomization of society and the disintegration of tradition and the loss of community, what can the artist do? Nothing useful in the political realm, Auden believed, but something important in the intellectual: art makes nothing happen, but it *orders* experience, it conceptualizes and comprehends history. In his "New Year Letter" of 1940, Auden wrote: "For art had set in order sense/ And feeling and intelligence." Auden's description of the 30's as "a low dishonest decade" contains a world of truth. And his role as a poet who "saw human actions as conditioned by history, and history as the necessity that people must recognize if they are to be free" became crucial to Auden's age in the sense that it made him an historical poet, one who interpreted events *as they were happening* to his contemporaries.

In my own case, Thucydides helped me confront a moral dilemma when I was pursuing graduate work in Classics, many decades ago, in the late 1960s. While I was studying Indo-European philology and Greek paleography and epigraphy, some of my friends from college were fighting in Vietnam, and others were publicly protesting the war, often to the point of being jailed for their actions. In my carrel in the Princeton library I remember feeling hopelessly inadequate, selfish, narrow-minded, and, to use the term so much in vogue in that generation, "irrelevant" to the world around me. Reading Thucydides' intense account of a long, destructive war, and discussing it in W. Robert Connor's seminar, restored to me a sense of purpose: Thucydides seemed to speak to me directly about the nature of war, the choices it imposed, the pressures it brought to bear on a democracy, the inversion of values it forced upon society, above all, the suffering it caused for all concerned. Now I had a text in front of me that demanded the closest, most engaged, personal attention. Philology seemed suddenly to *matter*.

As a result, I began to understand the dissolution of American society my friends and I were witnessing every day. I even got involved: I sent a letter to the *New York Times* comparing the conflict in Vietnam with the Sicilian Expedition (mercifully, it was not accepted for publication). Undaunted, I sent another, somewhat less naïve letter to my hometown newspaper in Norfolk, VA. Unfortunately, it *was* published, much to the chagrin of my father, who was not happy to have his classicist son registering his discontent with the government in front of all his relatives.

Now, some 44 years later, I have a son who is an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. He has served in Iraq twice, in Afghanistan once, and he has been deployed almost annually for the past 12 years in one Middle Eastern country or another. I know what it is like to wince every time the telephone rings. My son has done things I never did: he has led men into battle, he has tended to the wounded, he has commiserated with the parents of deceased comrades.

This past year he was a student in the Marine Corps University School of Advanced Warfighting, a high-level course of study designed to help officers think critically

about what they are doing, militarily, politically, socially, and culturally. The first text assigned in his course was Thucydides. After decades of paying scant attention to his father's scholarly passion, my son started sending me two or three emails a day asking for advice on how to read my favorite author, and for good secondary literature on the text. My son studied Thucydides in a way I have not, and could not: he read it in English, not Greek, but he discussed it with colleagues who had been to war multiple times. These men had an appreciation for its virtues that transcends the intellectual, even the ethical and the moral. For them, reading Thucydides constitutes not discovery, but *anagnorisis*, "re-cognition" of what they have already seen and done. In ancient Greek *anagnorisis* also means "reading." To know again, to recognize, to acknowledge: that is the kind of reading Thucydides enforces, intense, personal, replete with meaning.

Thucydides, when read this way, the way he intended, is revelatory. As Lowell Edmunds has demonstrated, Thucydides created a remarkable equivalence between his text and the war. They are the same thing. The Peloponnesian War is his war; his text *is* the Peloponnesian War. But it is also every war, fought again and again, over and over again, endlessly.

To read Thucydides is to understand what is happening as it happens, to identify some order amid chaos, to watch ethical conflict (cf. the Melian Dialogue) play out in real time, to grasp the perverted meanings of partisan slogans (stasis at Corcyra) as they emerge, to recognize recurring patterns of behavior, of states and their political leaders alike, and to see, beneath the surface, the self-interest that actually motivates them. On the evidence of history thus far, mankind will continue to go to war, generation after generation. We will continue to find rationales for declaring war, we will continue to listen to ambitious, patriotic politicians, we will continue to invade faraway countries, we will continue to debate the policies and politics of war, to be divided against ourselves, and we will continue to commit atrocities on and off the battlefield. For a creature of such a nature, Thucydides is strong medicine, necessary medicine. Read Thucydides, and tell a few others to read him too. It may not save civilization, but it is humbling and humanizing, and that is perhaps the most we can ask.