

Freshman Essay 2017

The Poetic Musings of a Historian's Mind:

*How Thucydides uses fiction to restore the past to the present*

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Looking down upon a checkered battle, an army of Athenian soldiers stand shrieking, cheering, and swaying before a sea of ships. Chaos and confusion are present, but greatest of all: terror. In moments, they will watch as their fate is forced out of the sea and led to its death. For, they have “no hope of escaping by land, without the help of some extraordinary accident” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 1-6).

In just a few lines of book seven of *The Peloponnesian War*, I am transported back to the familiar territory of the battlefield outside of Troy. I have witnessed the scene before, of men with spears huddled together in a foreign land, hoping for victory so that they can continue their voyage home. Thucydides’ resemblance to Homer in this moment is evident; his own setting mirrors many ancient ones depicted in *The Iliad*. However, it is not only through historical resemblance that the poet’s and his own account overlap. Thucydides’ tone decisively relays a poetic air, leaving behind fact-filled statements and evoking emotion through phrases like: “as the strife protracted without decision, their swaying bodies reflected the agitation of their minds, and they suffered the worst agony of all” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). This imaginative style conveyed by Thucydides calls me to acknowledge similarities between him and his poetic predecessors. Their mutual utilisation of fiction seems to bind them together. But, is it enough to give Thucydides’ history the status of poetry?

Upon my first impressions, it seemed feasible. For, how else are we to distinguish poetry from history, if not by the use of fiction? Such, as least were the questions ringing in my 21st century mind, engrained with ideas of fiction and history repelling one another. However, an alternative answer to that question may be revealed in the implications it carries: to ask whether a poet is distinguished by his choice to compose fiction, or if the differences extend even beyond that? According to Thucydides’ own analysis, the composition of fiction alone does not suffice in making a poet. For Thucydides insists upon distinguishing himself from the poets by calling out their

*unreliability* and highlighting his own *dependability* (Thucydides, 1. 9. 4). Yet to appeal to fiction is a quality shared between both of them.

Indeed, Thucydides acknowledges his own use of fiction in regard to his speeches. He writes: “it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions” (Thucydides, 1. 22. 1). What he means by “demanded of them” and whether or not this applies to scenes of action as well as the speeches, is less clear. For example, was it “demanded” by the various occasions to depict the soldiers reactions to the battle of Syracuse in the emotional manner that Thucydides does? Regardless of whatever manner one might describe “demanded”, fiction remains essential to Thucydides’ narrative; he makes them say what he needs them to say. Thus, if he is to distinguish himself from the poets, the differences must extend.

Alternatively, acknowledging different types of fiction may lead to a distinction between the poet and Thucydides. For, if the two cannot be distinguished *by* fiction, perhaps they can be distinguished *in* fiction. *In* their fiction, it appears that they compose it for different ends. At least, this is what Thucydides communicates when he presents his research of the ancient wars documented by the poets. With the facts of the war states, he suggests that fact must be separated from fiction in order to extract a true conclusion regarding those histories. For example, he writes: “Assuredly [the conclusions I have drawn] will not be disturbed either by the verses of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truths expense” (Thucydides, 1. 21. 1). It seems, in regard to poetry, if one wishes to find historical truths, those truths must be extract from fiction.

Given this, it would be easy to conclude that Thucydides is offering an all-encompassing critique of the poets, accusing them of being incapable of truth because of their use of fiction. However, the context surrounding the critique concerns *historical* truth: that which is known by fact

and evidence. Rather than all truth, historical truth must be distinguished as a subcategory of truth. For fiction is capable of holding truths in it as well. Thucydides is not concerned that the poets are neglecting historical truths. He is concerned with their tendency to make history indistinguishable from fiction, without a critical eye. He writes concerning this: “The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their country, is to receive them alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever” (Thucydides, 1. 20. 1). That the poet combines fact and fiction is an understandable way of creating an entertaining account for a reader, but without any warning as to what is fact or fiction, there is no means of distinguishing between the historical truths of the text from fictionally constructed truths. At least not for a reader so far removed from the events of antiquity as I am.

Thus, the poetic use of fiction, appears to be of temporary value. It may begin by benefiting the reader’s—or listener’s—historical knowledge, but as time passes, the boundaries between truth and fiction become “obscured by time” (Thucydides, 1. 20. 3). What remains of a history with uncertain truths is entertainment. Perhaps moral lessons or truths about human nature (such that would fall under the category as “fictionally based truths”) can be extracted, but the certainty of the history is lost.

This point becomes quite useful for creating a line of distinction between Thucydides’ fiction and the poets. For, he explains clearly that in his account of history he wants nothing to do with entertainment, seemingly for these reasons. He confirms this in writing, “The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it will be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future...I shall be content” (Thucydides, 1. 22. 4 ). As opposed to the poets, Thucydides is determined to keep that exactness of his account far from the deterioration of time, for his audience is the future. He finalises this claim in writing: “I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause

of the moment, but as a possession for all time” (Thucydides, 1. 23. 4). Following all that he has written regarding poetry, his argument communicates that poetic fiction is for the moment. But what Thucydides is aiming for is an account with greater endurance than that which is temporarily praised.

It is important to note, however, that Thucydides is not claiming to compose an account absent of fiction, but that his fiction is distinguished from the poetical kind, which would have been a familiar historical resource for many readers from his own time. In spite of the problems he addresses in regard to poetry, it is clear that he sees immense value in the style it employs to compose a story. For he adopts so much of it himself, to the extent that I’d argue that his account is not completely absent of romance, regardless of what he states. Breathing life into facts is a powerful tool, but seemingly also dangerous if done the wrong way.

It is exactly for this reason that Thucydides must distinguish himself from the poets, for he has no interest in concerning himself with entertainment when he aims to produce truth. The absence of truth in a history is a greater loss for him than absence of entertainment. Yet how he aims to produce truth is neither concerned with preserving the past or entertaining the present. His aim is to “create a possession for all time” (Thucydides, 1. 24. 4).

That Thucydides should concern himself with time is interesting. He has previously written of historical matters being “obscured by time” and even “time having robbed” other events of their historical value (Thucydides, 1. 20. 3; 1. 21. 1) . By its mere existence, time is working against the past. And, through being constant in its forward moving motion, the struggle of the historian is to preserve what has been left behind—in spite of the constantly expanding distance between himself and that event. Yet, the past is not what Thucydides is aiming for in stating that he means to create “a possession for all time” (Thucydides, 1. 23. 4). Preserving the past in perfect resemblance to each event would be a possession for the *past*. Additionally, such an account would never allow for fiction, which embellishes the past. Instead, he means to produce something to be “judged useful by

those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future” (Thucydides, 1. 23. 4). Thucydides’ history as a “possession for all time” is not meant to create barriers between the past, present and future—it is meant to remove them.

One of the most effective ways in which he goes about removing these barriers begins with the reader. The reader, by engaging with this work, is invited to be a spectator, by means of removing oneself from one’s present context and engaging with that of the history’s. Thucydides’ means of doing so begins with his narrative voice. In short, he has completely removed himself and his experiences from the work. Although, as an Athenian General, he was present in a great deal of the events of the war, he neither chooses to refer exclusively to his own experiences or write in a first person narrative. By silencing his own voice, he invites the reader’s mind to wander throughout the text, not as a listener, but as a spectator. This seems to be a conscious decision, for in his introduction, he has no aversion to writing in the first person. For example: “the conclusions *I* have drawn from the proofs” or “*My* conclusions have cost me some labour” (Thucydides, 1. 21-22). Yet, as soon as the narrative of the war begins, he removes himself as a first person speaker, eliminating any chance of his voice overpowering the reader’s.

Yet, his influence is not completely eliminated. Where his voice is lacking, his use of fiction makes up for its silent presence. Indeed, not only is this breaking of barriers effectively executed by Thucydides’ narrative voice, but it seems to be made complete by his use of fiction. The speeches are the best example of this. He warns the reader that the construction of his speeches is purely fictional, though the events themselves may have been real (Thucydides, 1. 22. 1). Arguably, fiction has no purpose in preserving the *past*. But, as previously stated, Thucydides is not concerned with the past, but rather, breaking down the barriers that exist between the *past* and the *present*.

In accordance with this, a greater part of his work is dedicated to the speeches. Their significance cannot be overlooked, for the mere magnitude of their presence in the history

communicates their importance. Nearly every major event in Thucydides' account is embedded in a series of speeches. And though they are fictional, the reader can rest assured that all fiction in Thucydides exists for the aim of allowing the reader to be a spectator to historical events, as a means of breaking down the barriers between the past and the present. Thucydides does not merely tell us that the speeches occurred and leave it at that. He recreates them and places the reader in the audience.

Take the speeches of Cleon and Diodotus before the Athenian assembly as an example of the power of an onlookers perspective into history (Thucydides, 3. 37-49). All that happens in the event could be summarised in a few simple phrases: *The Athenians wanted a revote concerning the execution of the Mytilenians. Cleon argues that they shouldn't bother saving them. Diodotus argues that they should. The vote is cast, and the Mytilenians are saved in the last minute.* There is nothing "false" in that summary, but it achieves nothing in regard to allowing the past to aid the reader's understanding of the future. So much is compromised for the sake of fact. The tensions of rhetoric: lost. The schemes of politics: lost. The urgency of time: lost. If anything, all is redeemed through Thucydides' fictional account of the speeches. The words of the two opponents come alive, and clash against one another like swords. All the while, the reader stands amongst his fellow Athenians, evaluating the arguments and contemplating a response. All this builds up to when Thucydides writes, "[The Athenians] now proceeded to a votes in which the show of hands was almost equal", and the reader stands among them, raising his hand (Thucydides, 3. 49. 1).

The way Thucydides powerfully places the reader in the audience of his history is similarly repeated during the naval battle in Syracuse. The reader's ground level closeness to the soldiers is unlike any of his previous battle depictions. Up until this moment, battles had been depicted from a birds-eye view, providing the necessary details, but from afar. The reader, now, stands alongside the soldiers, who are themselves spectators to the battle. He cheers alongside them, cries alongside them,

and sways alongside them (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). The battle itself is blurred, and remains in the background, as Thucydides takes this moment to focus on the soldiers, among whom the reader has become a fellow spectator.

Those spectators come in three different varieties. The first is the spectator who sees victory, specifically amongst his friends: his response is to “[take] courage” and call “upon the heavens” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). The second spectator sees loss, and is noted to have “their eyes turned upon those who were losing” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). The language used to describe them is interestingly unclear whether they happened to have their eyes turned upon the losing soldiers, or if they have chosen to fix their eyes only upon those who are losing. Nevertheless, their response is to wail and cry aloud (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). The third spectator sees the battle where it is “evenly disputed” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3). For this reason, they are described to suffer “the worst agony of all” and their response is simply to sway with their bodies (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3).

In comparison of these three spectators, the first thing to note is that they perceive the war in different ways: the first “sees”; the second “turns their eyes”; the third “gazes”. So, not only are they each seeing different outcomes in battle being fought, they are also looking at the battle differently. Secondly, each of the types of seeing are all followed by a verbal response, except for the third group of soldiers. The uncertainty forces them into a silence, which is significantly more terrifying in light of the “shrieks, cheers” and “every sound to be heard at once” around them (7. 71. 4).

Given these descriptions, it is important to recognise that the soldiers are neither distinguished by character or nature. Their differences are instead established by what they *see*. And, it is by sight that the reader securely takes his place amongst them, for he is guided to see the same things. In this way, the same time barrier broken between the reader in the event of the Athenian assembly is broken here. Yet, this example may even transcend the previous example. For the reader is not limited to only one way of seeing, as the soldiers are, but experiences the collective emotions



of all three spectators at once. From this, it is possible that the reader of a fictional account of history is exposed to a more nuanced understanding of the events of the wars than the actual soldiers themselves. At least, Thucydides certainly creates this possibility by collecting many experiences and presenting them to one reader.

Given this, I do not believe that it is a mere coincidence that the many speeches presented to the reader hold such a strong resemblance to the nature of warfare itself. As one assesses the speeches, both in their content and also their chronology, argumentation is exposed as another form of warfare. Their similarities are grounded in the idea of there being two opposing sides attacking one another. This is actualised in armies on a battlefield and politicians in an assembly. Both are representatives of an ideal that, in one way or another, clash with the ideals of the other. Then, at the end of the fight, one side leaves the winner, and the other, the loser. This connection becomes Thucydides' second means of breaking down the barriers between the reader and the events of the past. For in creating connections between events, the reader is allowed insight into how human experiences are repeated in different contexts.

As a whole, there are two types of battles in this account of Peloponnesian wars: physical and verbal. Throughout the course of the physical battles, however, we are never provided with an equivalent of the audience of the verbal battles until the battle at Syracuse. The Athenian soldiers may be likened to the spectators of the assembly, for they watch and respond to the battle at hand just as the spectators in the assembly previously described. For, in the example of the three different spectators, we witness that *how* they see may influence *what* they see. The type first *sees*; the second *turns their eyes*; the third *gazes*. Similarly, *how* one sees is often an issue in political assemblies; the spectators are not interested in seeing any point other than one that which they *wish* to see. This is why I previously stated that it was unclear whether the spectators who saw their navy loosing happened to turn their eyes in that direction, or if they chose to see it (Thucydides, 7. 71. 3).

Given these parallels, Thucydides has constructed connections between events that, chronologically, are more or less unrelated. Like when Cleon addresses the influence of sight in his speech to the Athenian assembly. He accuses them of seeing “an oration as you would to see a sight” (Thucydides, 3. 38. 4). His language evokes similarities between the audience of the assembly and the soldiers in Syracuse through *seeing*. Indeed, he is calling them spectators, just as the Athenian army is portrayed as spectators of the navy battle.

Other connections arise from Cleon’s speech, such as the likening the nature of speeches to warfare. He does so by criticising them for “applauding every hit almost before it is made”, giving the verbal arguments at hand physical illustrations, such as is actualised in what the Athenian spectators see in Syracuse (Thucydides, 3. 38. 6). And not only does his language evoke images of physical warfare, but also provides a parallel between the Athenian soldiers responding to what they see.

One may ask what Thucydides hopes to achieve in creating connections through similarities between events, such as physical and verbal warfare. But it is not the similarities that concern me, but rather what is inconsistent within the similarities. Between the Athenian assembly and the soldiers, the two groups are unified by their role as spectators to violence (whether it be verbal or physical) and each provides a response to what they see. However, a response is something only *required* of the audience in assemblies, in order to resolve the argument—not of the soldiers. Why would Thucydides bother describing the responses of spectators, when their responses hold no moral weight, as those of the assemblies would? In Thucydides’ account of the scene, he writes of the soldiers watching: “The fate of the Athenians being placed in their fleet, their fear for the event was like nothing they had ever felt” (Thucydides, 7. 71. 2). This quote evokes another difference, for in the assemblies, the fate is placed in the audience. They controlled the fate of the Mytilenians. Is it possible that what is being expressed in the scene in Syracuse is a demotion of the Athenian

democratic power? There the soldiers stand, in a foreign country, and their democratic structure has no power. For the fate does not rest in them as spectators. It is in their navy.

Thucydides' choice to allow fiction into his account of history certainly makes connections between accounts, allowing the reader new insight into events. But, perhaps more can be said about this in relation to this work being "a possession for all time". For why allow the connections to be limited to within this narrative, connecting the past only with the past? If Thucydides' aim is to use the past as an aid for the future, then his use of fiction for personal insight and connections between events must also apply to readers in any context. As "a possession for all time", it seems imperative that these connections aren't limited between historical events. For, if the only thing achieved by Thucydides work was to allow the reader insight into the past, then there are many alternatives to this account that Thucydides could have chosen: poetry, a first-person narrative, or a report of events. But he chose otherwise. And in choosing to let the reader wander as a spectator in this history, consequently, the reader will bring all of his experiences with him. And as a spectator in the world, he will see the past through the same eyes he uses to see the present. Perhaps, he will "gaze", or maybe even "turn [his] eyes". Whichever way he goes about it, Thucydides has ensured that the reader will *see*.

Simply by engaging in this work, I myself have swayed beside soldiers and cheered next to citizens. I have witnessed the rhetoric of politicians and seen failings in the strategic attempts of generals. But has seeing been enough? Remembering Thucydides' words, he wrote: "but if it will be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future...I shall be content" (Thucydides, 1. 22. 4 ). The *if* of that sentence convicts me more and more with each time I read it. It is a confrontation by the author to the reader. Even before the reader is allowed to glimpse at each terrifying and brilliant moment, he must first answer: what is *my* purpose in reading this? The roles change; responsibility is cast away from the

author and onto the reader. What can I do to take advantage of this opportunity of glancing into history to judge it useful enough to aid my present understanding? Perhaps the answer is simply to respond. For, as I have borne witness to time and time again, seeing demands a response. Thus, as a spectator to this history, I cannot look upon this text without responding, physically or verbally. Am I going to be the spectator who sees and shouts praises? Or gazes and wails? Or turns my eyes, looking on in silence? Is there a moral weight that hinges upon my response as for the Athenian assembly? Or is my response removed from the fate which lies in front of me, as with the soldiers in Syracuse? In whichever manner it appears, I can rest assured that as long as a response is given, that is enough.