

## REVIEW

A LIFETIME'S THINKING:  
HAWTHORN'S THUCYDIDES

Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xxii + 274. Paperback, £19.99. ISBN 978-1-107-61200-6.

Geoffrey Hawthorn's last published book reads as an accompaniment to *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, a translation of Thucydides by H.'s friend and colleague Jeremy Mynott, published in 2013.<sup>1</sup> H.'s admiration for Thucydides' work is palpable, as well as his deep engagement with the text over many decades. I remember vividly discussing with H. for many hours at one Thucydides conference precisely how an author who can appear initially so detached can be so attractive and provoke such passion, almost fandom, perhaps love. That Thucydides managed to retain the attention of such an intellectually omnivorous mind as H.'s, nor his alone, for so long, is testament to his capacity to pose questions that cannot be encompassed neatly within any of the academic fields today that structure our intellectual activity. Thucydides has an uncanny ability to reflect his reader. He is a general to a military historian, a theorist to International Relations scholars, a tragedian to a classicist. Therefore, to someone with the intellectual adventurousness and originality of H., Thucydides emerges as an explorer, unafraid to tell the nonsensical truth and able to switch modes fluently to do so.

H.'s book is greater than the sum of its parts. The parts themselves, barring the introductory and concluding chapters, are dominated by re-telling Thucydides' narrative, including sometimes long sections of quotation from Mynott's translation, mostly without a correspondingly detailed response or analysis. The result is a book that at its worst moments appears redundant. On the other hand, this method also results in a welcome shift of attention, so often marked in writings on Thucydides by political theorists, away from the speeches and onto the campaigns (better reflecting the actual balance between them in the text), and in particular onto the politics underpinning each move within the campaign, on which H. is excellent, albeit sometimes a touch speculative. He states: 'I read [Thucydides] in ways that others do not, and have been unable to resist writing for those who might like to think again about it

<sup>1</sup> I apologise for the extreme lateness of this review, due to ill health.

as well as for those who do not know about it' (x). The book fails to quite align the needs of these two audiences, however, with too much superfluous narrative for the knowledgeable reader and at times too much ellipsis for the uninitiated. For instance, the Greekless reader might be disorientated by a chapter on 'Emotion in deed', which argues that the Athenian action at Melos was *hubris*, and defines the term and where it tends to occur in Thucydides, without specifying that Thucydides does not use it anywhere in the Melian Dialogue. Similarly, the chapter 'Interests' does not address the definition or usage by Thucydides of *opheleia*, despite discussing several other definitions, including *aitia*, *dunamis*, and *arche*.

Although this balance is not quite struck, this does not define the book. For me, what stand out are H.'s insightful and innovative opinions that revitalize a reading of the text. It is refreshing to find more credence given to Perdiccas' political astuteness than to Pericles', to hear Book 8 praised on its own terms by someone with sufficient love of the political matter that constitutes it to do it justice, and to find Thucydides' own stated analysis of events—often clung onto in despair by critics—treated with outright skepticism, as in the following (66–7):

The most charitable explanation for these judgements on Pericles, on what politics in Athens was to become, on the Athenians' strategy in the first ten years of war, on the reasons for their failure in Sicily and on why they eventually lost the war, is that Thucydides made them in haste in the lasting shock of that defeat; that he was preoccupied by the memory of the debacle at Syracuse in 413 and of the brief interruption of government in Athens in 411; and that he had overlooked what he had written about events between Pericles' last speech in 430, the end of the Sicilian campaign and the recovery from the coup that followed ... As historical judgements, they do not do him justice and one can regret that he set them down. [on Th. 2.65]

H. might be alone in his last stated emotion there, and I do not share all his idiosyncratic opinions, such as there being a lack of Athenian strategy at the outset of the war: I find it hard not to interpret Pericles' advice to the Athenians that they should pay attention to their navy and not to try to engage the Spartans on land or extend their empire, as the statement of a strategy—albeit a flawed one. His arguments, weaker or stronger though they may be, do coalesce into a compelling argument that Thucydides' presentation of the political actions of his time fails to illuminate any 'overarching theories' which may have been ascribed to them, but rather that he has made a 'case study: an account of what it is to practice politics and make war that raises questions for other times and places but can answer them only for its own' (236).

Although his arguments might, *pace* the above, be sometimes understated and have benefited from longer explanation, clearly they are the result of many decades of careful and broad-ranging consideration, as well as teaching, of Thucydides. One of the consequences of this is that it is distractingly full of misspellings and inconsistencies of transliteration—something understandable in decades-worth of personal notes, but which should have been corrected at the proofing stage. The fate of the Corcyreans is extreme: we first meet them as relatively stable Corcyraeans (28), yet at 37 they end the chapter having suddenly switched allegiance to Corcyreans, before returning to their former Corcyraean status at 55. By 97 they are in complete flux, Corcyreans twice in one paragraph before being overtaken by Corcyraeans in the next, who retain the upper hand into the next paragraph. But by 99 the Corcyreans are back in control, although they are now living on Corcyrea (except in the footnote). Not for nothing did H. write ‘I despair of consistency in rendering Greek names’ (xi), although perhaps in this case the copyeditor is trying to tell us something. Joking aside, it is surprising to see Astyochus and Astychus, Phrynichus and Phyrnichus, in the same paragraphs (221, 227), especially in a chapter where students have to differentiate between Therimenes and Theramenes. These minor and distracting irritations aside, this is clearly the work of long rumination, encompassing an exceptionally wide range of sources, and it is illuminating to consider Thucydides in the context of Shelley and *Cymbeline*, as well as Macaulay, Williams, or Nietzsche, on top of the more standard guides that H. makes excellent use of, such as Rood, Hornblower, and Gomme.

This book is now three years old, and H., very sadly, has been dead for two years. More prompt reviews than mine will have helped readers determine whether to read this or another for themselves in the meantime. So what should now be added? Is H.’s likely to be a critique that will last? Although it is too soon to tell, the axis of the world has begun to wobble at a somewhat increased pace in the last three years. After a campaign fraught with unsubstantial suppositions and misinformation, Britain has voted for Brexit, to cut rather than to weave closer ties to the EU; the USA has elected President Trump and political discourse in that country is riven with mistrust and disdain on all sides. ‘For [Thucydides], there are the truths of events, the truths (as well as the deceptions and outright falsehoods) of speech and the truths that are revealed in the often distant relation between the two, and to draw attention to these differences was itself a political act in a society in which, like many since, competing rhetorics could distort and falsify’ (8). It is impossible not to shiver at the appositeness of this statement in today’s world of ‘alternative facts’, especially given the consequences that Thucydides describes of a widening gulf between the truth of speech and the truths of events. H.’s closing pages also make for sobering reading (239):

Later fifth-century Athens stands out as a moment of unillusion, a moment in which if one had the courage and the talent, and Thucydides evidently had both, it was possible to look at human nature and the ever-changing complexities of the political world in the eye rather than divert oneself to the past or some hopeful future or another world altogether.

If we are now approaching a similar moment of ‘unillusion’, we can only hope that we will have such a Thucydides, or at least such a H., as our guide.

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