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**Thucydides and Artemis: the Artful Narrative of the History**

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Thucydides' work concludes in the middle of a sentence about the 21st year of a war that spanned 27 years. We can resist the temptation to conclude that Thucydides' work is unfinished not only because our author informs us that he lived to see the whole war but because the structural outline of his work shows why its abrupt and apparently incomplete conclusion is necessary. Careful attention to the broader architecture of Thucydides' work reveals a movement from the tensions within political justice as the Greeks understood it, to a presentation of nature as a standard for morality and politics. But in Thucydides' hands, nature as a standard by which one can judge politics and moral virtue must ultimately be exchanged in favor of a return to the standard of Greek, and especially Athenian, politics albeit a return mediated by the foregoing

reflections on the limits to political life and human nature. The necessity of this return to the conventions of Athenian politics is thus at once occasioned *and* conditioned by an awareness and acceptance of the fundamental limits to the moral and political categories that define human life, an awareness reflected in the puzzling conclusion of the History.

In the last sentence of the book, Thucydides reports that the Persian satrap Tissaphernes “went to Ephesus and offered sacrifice to Artemis.” By invoking Artemis at the close of his work, Thucydides’ artistry recalls our attention to the first words of his epic – “Thucydides an Athenian”. By opening his work with the name of an Athenian male and closing it with the name of a barbarian goddess, Thucydides invites us to reflect on the many dyads at work in the History (peace-war, Athens-Sparta, Greek-barbarian, land-sea, rest-motion, justice-necessity) and to add to them human-divine, male-female, reason-generation. Thucydides’ History presents these dyads in a manner that suggests they are all inextricably linked such that one element of a dyad cannot be known apart from the element antithetical to it. If one of the effects of these bookends is to substitute Thucydides for Apollo, the god of reason and Artemis’ twin brother, then Thucydides’ “incomplete” conclusion compels us to wonder how the divine representation of generation completes our understanding of its human twin: how does Artemis help us understand Thucydides? How might generation complement reason and its artful product that is the History?

To understand why this might be a fitting conclusion to the work, we need to attend the structure of Thucydides’ account of the war, a structure that conveys an argument about the priority of politics to human wisdom. For the purposes of the present sketch, we can identify four major parts of that structure. While the divisions charted below follow the major acts of the war (and coincide with the “Books” that tradition gives us) they also represent the steps of an argument internal to the History whose logic I hope to clarify. Needless to say, what follows can

only constitute a sketch of the History's structure, one whose contours I draw more sharply than the History would otherwise allow.

The Structure of the History  
Part One: II.1 to IV.133

Thucydides opens Part One by noting that his account of the war will follow natural or seasonal chronology (II.1). He does not follow the customs of his time by recording events according to who held high office (i.e., archons) or who had won high honors at the time of a particular event (i.e., Olympic victors). After all, people disagree about when a particular term of office began or ended and the celebration of religious festivals or athletic contests can be altered by human agreement (V.20.2). The change of seasons, however, occurs entirely independent of human agency. And yet Thucydides identifies the years in question by referring to archonships, Olympic games, religious festivals and priestess-ships (II.2;cf. V.20.1). We are thus invited to wonder whether the proper source of human guidance is a nature that is the same always and everywhere and knowable to the unaided human mind. Or should we take our bearings from the political community, whose laws and customs vary from place to place?

Throughout Part One, Thucydides examines a conception of politics which understands itself to be an authoritative, self-sufficient whole, one to which all else, even religious custom, is subordinate. Much of this first Part is framed by the Theban assault on Plataea whose initial sally is frustrated by Plataeans digging through the walls of their private homes to coordinate their resistance. By breaking down what separates them as particular individuals the Plataeans courageously secure what is common to them all. Thucydides builds on this wonderfully rich image when he turns in the immediate sequel to the founding of Athens by Theseus, a man who successfully united Athens under one political and religious authority by forcing those in the

country to move to the city, people who then carried in with them the doors, shutters and walls of their country homes (II.14). That the Athenians clung to what privately separated them even as they “united” publicly should prove disconcerting for the creation of a city that sought to place the good of the community over that of the individual. And yet, as the experience of the plague in Athens reveals, there is such a thing as being too close together (II.53 and II.16-17); perhaps distance -- walls, doors -- between us is necessary. To have a healthy city requires striking a judicious balance of mixing together and separating. It is the genius of Pericles that he is able to do this so effectively. And yet despite his exemplary rule, its successes do not fully resolve the tensions at the heart of Greek politics.

Thucydides’ archaeology (I.2-20) anticipated some of the difficulties with a Greek conception of justice that tries to combine a radical love of freedom with devotional submission to the law. But these difficulties are given their fullest treatment in the Corcyrean civil war (III.69-85), whose report follows the surrender of Plataea to Sparta and Thebes (68, especially 68.3). The sharp clash of partisan interest in Corcyra punctures the image of a hermetically sealed political community, one defined by a shared conception of the just and the good. In Corcyra, peaceful and civilized life gives way to a complete or nearly-complete Hobbesian State of Nature, one in which the laws of the gods and of men are disregarded almost without shame. *Almost*. For while the conception of politics as a self-sufficient whole rooted in divine and ancestral authority might prove problematic, Thucydides prevents us from dismissing political life completely. After all, even as they tear each other apart, the Corcyreans do so in the name of or motivated by moral categories (III.82.8). It seems we cannot so simply dismiss the importance of political life to human nature. Perhaps then supremely talented individuals can look to nature

as a standard for their conduct of political affairs, authorizing laws whose weakness in the face of human passions suggested that their power rested on little more than convention.

Thucydides appears to take up this alternative from III.86 to V.17, where he presents the careers of two generals, Demosthenes an Athenian, and Brasidas *the* outstanding Spartan, men whose outstanding natures owe virtually nothing to the cities they fight for. Demosthenes approaches nature as a guide, one that can be used, imitated and perhaps even improved upon, but not one that can be overcome and disregarded. Both his initial failures and his later successes can be understood against the backdrop of the earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes whose report introduces his story (III.87-89). Moreover, his successes derive in part from the proper mixing and separating of forces. His victories thus recall Pericles' unique ability to take the measure of and balance the contending forces of Athenian politics, one that Thucydides elsewhere suggests (II.102) is predicated on a view of nature that rejects the possibility of providential gods who intervene in our affairs according to our understandings of justice.

For Brasidas, on the other hand, alone in Thrace with an army full of Helots, nature is his nature and not the principles of the material world through which he marches on the way to more conquests. His greatness is not the product of harnessing the physical world to fit his designs; the greatness of Brasidas comes to sight in his sweeping disregard of any and all limits to his political ambitions. Like an earthquake at the time of an eclipse and new moon (IV.52), Brasidas' victorious march through Thrace exhibits an unbridled nature in motion with no cosmic light to give it its bearings or to check its flow.

In the end, the alternatives represented by Demosthenes and Brasidas are both inadequate. Demosthenes' apparent attachment to an indifferent nature reflects an Athenian turn of mind, one whose particular openness to nature represents the flip-side of a pious concern for

“divine” or unchanging wholes. As the Athenians at Delos strive to create an island of unchanging purity, Demosthenes operates militarily on a view of nature whose mechanistic principles are forever fixed. Insofar as nature remains unchanging and intelligible to Demosthenes, and therefore something that humans can manage for their purposes, it is not entirely indifferent to human concerns. And Brasidas cannot represent a solution to the problems of political life if only because he seeks to leave behind political life completely. In his Thracian campaign, Brasidas wins those glories and honors sought by aspiring tyrants and which are reserved for only the most revered, an immortality that belongs to those able to transcend political life entirely. And yet, Brasidas can only win the acknowledgment that he seeks for himself by a kind of noble suicide in which he leaves behind the means that allowed him to demonstrate his greatness in the first place. There may be no greater illustration of the incoherence at the core of Greek politics than the illustrious end of this most famous Spartan.

#### Part Two: V.18 to V.113

Part Two offers a backlash against the problems posed to regimes like Sparta by the natures of a community’s most impressive individuals. Beginning at V.18, one encounters the text of a series of treaties and alliances (V.18, 23, 47, 77, 79). These documents represent the effort to stabilize the contending interests of parties jockeying for power. What Pericles managed to keep in motion domestically, these treaties try to fix “permanently” in the international realm. But all of these treaties and alliances fail and they fail because they insist on the sharpness of distinctions that political and human life do not allow. Of course, the failure of treaties here has more to do with the limitations of the kind of political speech they represent than it does the ever-shifting forces of politics. Thucydides illustrates these limitations to political speech in the

dialogue between Athenians and Melians that concludes this Book (V.85-113) the substance and outcome of which bears on the status of justice among nations.

We may summarize that exchange and its significance as follows: in trying to persuade the Melians to surrender to them, the Athenians attempt to translate the sign of their superior strength into evidence of their superior goodness. They fail at doing so. But even more than that, the Athenian envoys involve themselves in an incoherent mess, making the contradictory claim that their virtue in practicing rule as they do at once constitutes their nobility, even as it is at the same time the instrument, the means by which, they are to earn rule over the Melians, a rule that is then to signify their superior worthiness. The Melian dialogue, by revealing the incoherence of the Athenians' effort in this respect, suggests that any attempt by purely human means to disclose candidly the link between superior moral goodness and superior power requires a less direct route, one that cannot be captured in speeches and certainly not captured in treaties. Perhaps the truth about where we should take our rightful guidance from cannot be openly revealed to men.

This may explain why Thucydides notes at the beginning of Book VI that the poetic accounts of the ancient past in Sicily are irrelevant from his perspective. If claims of revelation cannot provide us with knowledge about what they reveal, then we cannot confirm or deny their stories. We therefore need not bother engaging these accounts. Moreover, in this Part Thucydides is remarkably silent about the non-human motions that cause so much suffering in the rest of the History. Thucydides' account of the Sicilian campaign will focus solely on human nature as it comes to sight through Athens' engagement with Syracuse.

Part Three: VI.1 to VII.87

Syracuse represents the Athenian alternative to Athens (VII.55): her government is democratic and her citizens are innovative, deliberative and daring. And yet she appears to combine these traits without the frenzied erotic longing to rule that plagues her Athenian counterparts. The purpose of reflecting on this engagement between the two cities thus seems twofold: first, to show the political consequences of an unrestrained *eros* and second, to see if it was possible for a community that otherwise resembled Athens to regulate the erotic impulse to pursue empire. Of the latter, Thucydides' narrative shows Syracuse's imperial restraint to be the product of circumstance not of a principled or lawful resistance to it. As for the former, the love of liberty found in the private erotic pursuits of the Athenian tyrannicides (VI.53-59) becomes in Athens a tireless push for democratic freedom and the pursuit of limitless empire (VI.90; VI.18). In her citizens the pursuit of empire becomes the endless pursuit of gain, comfort and security (VI.24.3). In seeking mastery over the entire Mediterranean, Athens aspires to a freedom from anything that might limit them as a community or as individuals.

Athens at its peak proved so successful because it largely managed to respect and preserve the political distinctions from which the city's political energies derived. But in pursuing the conquest of all of Sicily Athens sought to overcome or disregard any such distinctions as unnecessary boundaries on its own erotic ambitions. The results of such an effort prove disastrous. Thus we see the Athenians, in their night attack on heights above Syracuse, fail to take Epipolae because the darkness of the night and the similarity of human forms made it impossible for them to distinguish friend from foe (VII.44-45). The Doric language spoken by both armies also made it possible for the Sicilians to steal the watchword of the attackers and for the paeans sung by both sides to strike terror into the hearts of the Athenians. While the Athenians share in common with their enemies both speech and "forms", it is the failure to



denote the particular details that give to speech and forms their distinct political and human relevance which leads to Athens' defeat.

This disaster was followed by others. Thucydides describes the failed Athenian effort to “escape” from Sicily as a land-battle at sea. The defeated Athenians were subsequently forced to retreat over land, with troops suffering from dysentery brought on by their having encamped near a marshland; that is, their bodies were degraded by something that wasn't quite water or land (VII.47). In an earlier effort to extend their siege works, the Athenians tried to cross the marsh by laying down doors and planks; the same material they once used for the walls that defined their exclusive common good they now use to overcome a categorical obfuscation found in nature (VI.101). Though Athens ultimately fails in Sicily, Thucydides' artistry tempts us here with the intriguing possibility that certain, well-defined political forms are critical to those particular distinctions that make our world intelligible.

From the very beginning, however, the Sicilian campaign was predicated on an almost willful disregard of political distinctions. Thucydides tells us that the Athenians were ignorant of both the size and population of Sicily (VI.1.1) despite a long experience with the place. When the Athenians voted for the expedition, Thucydides indicates that while “*eros* fell upon all alike” (VI.24.3) to set sail there was still a part of the city that silently objected (VI.24.4); Athens sees a unified whole where there is yet division. And this political blindness at home leads to strategic errors abroad. Thus, despite Nicias's reminders that the Athenians will need cavalry to counter the numerous Sicilian horse (VI.20.4, 21.1), the Athenians only take *30 horses* with them (VI.43)! To have recognized the need for the knights, that faction within Athens almost certainly opposed to the campaign, and to have incorporated them into the expedition would have required the Athenians to limit what they hoped to achieve in Sicily in light of their fractured character as

a political community. While the disaster in Sicily provides them with a brutal reminder of their limitations, such an experience does not lead them to moderate their hopes in the kind of wholeness that political life can provide. Instead they exchange despair for confidence.

#### Part Four: VIII

The destruction of the Athenian force in Sicily shows the dangers to both politics and intelligibility of an erotic longing unrestrained by any limits, natural or divine. As readers of the History we are thus impressed with the need for moral and intellectual limits. That need, combined with the History's critique of our ability to know and thus be guided by categorical wholes that exist in any pure or absolute sense, recommends to us a return to the kind of limits that one finds in Greek, and especially Athenian, political life. In Book VIII Thucydides charts this return, beginning with a Spartan-like conception of moderation and culminating in the measured regime of Athens' Five Thousand. It is worth observing here that such a measured balance was based on an experience with extreme necessity and not, say, the more traditional (i.e., religious) sources of law and order.

Thucydides' praise of this regime suggests that we are to take seriously its chief virtue and the encounter with necessity of which it is the product. Such an encounter required the Athenians to see things as they are and not as they wished them to be. In this case, that meant that parts of the community, if only temporarily, had to suspend their claim to rule on account of their worth or deserving, that is on account of their willingness to accept their limited place in the new political order. This is made possible only by working through the problems facing the Athenians' hopes for a world in which their superior goodness will be recognized and rewarded. But to acknowledge and accept the necessity of such problems is also to accept that we cannot hope to know wholes, categories or forms apart from the particulars that make them humanly

relevant. It is to accept that we cannot participate in pure or absolute wholes like “justice” or “the good” such that by doing so we remedy our fundamental neediness. In other words, it means we cannot get beyond the contingent particularities of political life if we hope to satisfy our concern to know “the clear truth” (I.20) about human affairs. And this means that our capacity to know the world is conditioned by the very insight which occasioned such knowledge; the problematic character of Greekness provides us with both the means by which political life can be known for what it is and the character of that which is to be known. By being incomplete, the final sentence of the History illustrates these insights into our inability to know wholes. And in calling attention to Artemis, Thucydides’ divine twin, it tempts us to see Thucydides’ reason as itself a form of generation, in this case generating those conditions whereby one can know the world for it is. To put it differently, it seems human wisdom requires the presence of a particular kind of politics, one which Thucydides experienced for himself and which he allows us to experience in the pages of his artfully structured History.