

Thucydides and the Historiography of Trauma

Neville Morley

► **To cite this version:**

Neville Morley. Thucydides and the Historiography of Trauma. *KTÈMA Civilisations de l'Orient, de la Grèce et de Rome antiques*, Université de Strasbourg, 2017, 42, pp.195-206. <halshs-01669272>

HAL Id: halshs-01669272

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01669272>

Submitted on 21 Dec 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

KTÉMA

CIVILISATIONS DE L'ORIENT, DE LA GRÈCE ET DE ROME ANTIQUES

Les interprétations de la défaite de 404

Edith FOSTER	Interpretations of Athen's defeat in the Peloponnesian war.....	7
Edmond LÉVY	Thucydide, le premier interprète d'une défaite anormale	9
Tim ROOD	Thucydides, Sicily, and the Defeat of Athens	19
Cinzia BEARZOT	La συμφορά de la cité La défaite d'Athènes (405-404 av. J.-C.) chez les orateurs attiques.....	41
Michel HUMM	Rome, une « cité grecque » prise par les Hyperboréens.....	53
David S. LEVENE	Rome Redeems Athens? Livy, the Peloponnesian War, and the Conquest of Greece.....	73
Estelle OUDOT	Ultime défaite d'Athènes ou sa plus belle victoire ? Stratégies rhétoriques autour de la bataille d'Aigos-Potamoi dans le <i>Panathénaique</i> d'Aelius Aristide.....	85
Hans KOPP	The Defeat of Athens in 404 BC in <i>The Federalist</i>	97
Maciej JUNKIERT	Polish Reflections: The Reception of the Defeat of Athens in the Works of Gottfried Ernst Groddeck and Joachim Lelewel.....	115
Tobias JOHO	The Internal Commotion of Greek Culture: Jacob Burckhardt on the Defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.....	127
Christian WENDT	Spree-Athen nach dem Untergang Eduard Meyer zur Parallelität von Geschichte.....	151
Oliver SCHELSKE	Der Kampf um die Demokratie Thukydidés in Deutschland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg.....	167
Dominique LENFANT	Défaite militaire et révolution antidémocratique Le parallèle entre l'Athènes de 404 et la France de 1940 dans <i>Les Oligarques</i> de Jules Isaac.....	183
Neville MORLEY	Thucydides and the Historiography of Trauma.....	195

Le *thauma* dans l'historiographie grecque d'époque impériale

Agnès MOLINIER ARBO	Hérodien, Rome et le spectacle du pouvoir παράδοξα et θαύματα dans l' <i>Histoire de l'Empire</i> après la mort de Marc Aurèle	207
Michèle COLTELLONI-TRANNOY	La place du <i>thauma</i> dans l' <i>Histoire romaine</i> de Cassius Dion.....	219
Philippe TORRENS	Le lexique de l'étonnement chez Appien. Quelques remarques.....	233

Varia

Jean DUCAT	Du caractère « mixte » du régime spartiate	251
Michel WORONOFF	L'image de la défaite dans l' <i>Illiade</i>	271

N° 42

STRASBOURG

2017

KTÈMA

CIVILISATIONS DE L'ORIENT, DE LA GRÈCE ET DE ROME ANTIQUES

Revue annuelle

Fondateurs : Edmond FRÉZOULS †
Edmond LÉVY

Comité Directeur: Dominique BEYER, Bruno BLECKMANN, Jean-François BOMMELAER, Frédéric COLIN, Mireille CORBIER, Gérard FREYBURGER, Jean GASCOU, Jean-Georges HEINTZ, Michel HUMBERT, Anne JACQUEMIN, Stavros LAZARIS, Dominique LENFANT, Edmond LÉVY, Jean-Claude MARGUERON, Henriette PAVIS D'ESCURAC, Laurent PERNOT, Thierry PETIT, Gérard SIEBERT

Rédaction: Edmond LÉVY
Dominique BEYER et Gérard FREYBURGER

Maquette et mise en page: Ersie LERIA

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Strasbourg
5 allée du Général Rouvillois – CS50008
FR-67083 STRASBOURG CEDEX
Tél: (33) 03 68 85 62 65
info.pus@unistra.fr
pus.unistra.fr

Ventes au numéro

En librairie ou en commande en ligne sur le site
du Comptoir des presses d'universités : www.lcdpu.fr

Abonnements

CID
cid@msh-paris.fr

Adresse postale:
18 rue Robert-Schuman
CS 90003
FR-94227 CHARENTON-LE-PONT CEDEX
Tél. : 01 53 48 56 30
Fax : 01 53 48 20 95

ISSN 0221-5896
ISBN 978-2-86820-963-4

Thucydides and the Historiography of Trauma

RÉSUMÉ-. L'historiographie du traumatisme, un thème de recherche important ces dernières années, suggère une approche pour interpréter le récit de la défaite d'Athènes par Thucydide. Cet article explore comment Pierre Vidal-Naquet s'est appuyé sur Thucydide dans ses discussions sur la représentation historique de l'holocauste et se demande jusqu'à quel point nous pourrions voir le travail de Thucydide comme un modèle pour les récits modernes d'atrocités. Il considère ensuite la possibilité que le récit de Thucydide soit lui-même le produit d'un traumatisme et les implications pour notre interprétation de celui-ci s'il est considéré comme un *acting out* ou un *working through* de ses propres expériences passées.

ABSTRACT-. The historiography of trauma, an important research theme in recent years, suggests an approach to the interpretation of Thucydides' account of the defeat of Athens. This paper explores how Pierre Vidal-Naquet drew on Thucydides in his discussions of the historical representation of the Holocaust, and how far we might see Thucydides' work as a model for modern accounts of atrocity. It then considers the possibility that Thucydides' narrative was itself the product of trauma, and the implications for our interpretation if it is seen as an acting out or a working through of his own past experiences.

The experience of defeat—certainly the kind of defeat experienced by Athens, total surrender following the disastrous Sicilian expedition, the breakdown of political consensus and the catastrophic defeat at Aegospotamoi—can be understood as a sub-species of trauma, even for those who were not directly involved in the military disasters. It may be productive, therefore, to read Thucydides' account of that defeat, including his own personal reverses in the course of the war, in conjunction with modern discussions of the historiography of trauma, in particular the debates around the historiography of the Holocaust. On the one hand, Thucydides offers a provocative and potentially useful model of how it may be possible to write a historical account of such traumatic events, avoiding—or at least taking a different approach towards—some of the problems that have been identified with contemporary attempts. On the other hand, this comparison with contemporary historiography suggests a line of interpretation of his work as being itself the product of trauma, and an attempt at coming to terms with it.¹

(1) For a general introduction to these issues, see LERNER & MICAËLE 2001.

I. THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA

As Thucydides said, we will never know how *each* one disappeared.²

Pierre Vidal–Naquet opened his 1987 essay “Assassins of Memory” with Thucydides’ account (4.80.1–4) of how the Spartans, under pressure from Athenian attacks on their territory and fearing a revolt of their subject population, promised freedom to those helots who felt they had done the greatest service to Sparta. The two thousand who put themselves forward for this opportunity were assumed to be the boldest and hence the most dangerous, and were therefore invisibly done away with shortly afterwards.

Vidal–Naquet notes that Thucydides describes the atrocity in “a partially encoded language”, reminiscent of euphemisms of the Final Solution such as “selection” and “special operation,” but his primary concern is with the basic historiographical problem: how to tell or explain such an event? The task of the historian is to “purge as best he can his work of all that is fabricated, legendary or mythical”—an exhortation that strongly resembles conventional ideas about Thucydidean historiography—but in the case of the Holocaust, as with other atrocities, there is both an additional imperative to seek out the truth, and an enormous barrier. The historian should of course offer a true account of events and actors:

He cannot, however, say all, and what he can no doubt *least* communicate is death as it was experienced by the victims once the doors closed. It is easier to write the history of Buchenwald than of Auschwitz, and easier to write that of Auschwitz than of Treblinka. As Thucydides said, we will never know how *each* one disappeared.³

The absent voice of the victims of the death camps is both the central horror of Holocaust historiography, and its central problem: the historian is duty-bound not to offer fiction or fabrication, but to honestly describe the limitations as well as the contents of the surviving evidence. However, it is the absence of direct testimony from those murdered in the death camps that is most commonly put forward as a clinching proof by those who deny the Holocaust ever happened.

Thucydides powerfully conveyed the secrecy with which the Spartans disposed of the helots, emphasising the ruthlessness and effectiveness of the action—but begging the question of how he could claim to have any knowledge of the event, in the absence of any evidence of what had happened to the victims, let alone their own reports, and assuming that the Spartans would have denied all knowledge. It is a powerful episode, but one based on a fiction, or at least on the implicit claim that the historian knew things that he could not actually know. Faced with the absence of direct testimony, with the only evidence being the disappearance without trace of the supposed victims, the historian has little choice but to rely on his readers’ faith in his honesty and dedication to the truth, for them to accept that his report is the most plausible on offer—but that it opens the way to others, claiming still stronger adherence to the values of historiography, denying that such atrocities ever took place because of the lack of evidence. Vidal–Naquet closes this essay in a state of deep pessimism about whether the truth will have the final word; Thucydides highlights the problem without offering any solution.

In “The Holocaust’s Challenge to History”, written a year later, Vidal–Naquet offers a more explicit and positive account of Thucydides as a model for modern historians of atrocity, this time taking as his key example the depiction of the violent events of the *stasis* at Corcyra. He distances himself from the idea conventionally attributed to Thucydides that “human nature” will lead to the

(2) VIDAL–NAQUET 1992, p. 109.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 109.

recurrence of “paroxysmal evils,” but then insists that this is in any case not the most important aspect of his work:

It seems to me that his teaching is, in this case, threefold. He reminds us first that a history of the present is indeed possible. However, and this is my second point, any history, including that of the present, presupposes a distancing of the historian from the events. Finally, and perhaps essentially, any history is comparative even when it believes it is not.⁴

Vidal–Naquet’s concern here is with the absence, even by the late 1980s, of any French historians engaging with the Holocaust. This was in some cases a form of denial—even of wishful thinking, but certainly an unwillingness to confront either traumatic events or the possible culpability of French society in them. However, it also reflected a genuine concern about the relationship between history and memory when it came to events of the relatively recent past. This relationship could be seen as representing the reverse problem of that discussed in the earlier essay; Vidal–Naquet shifts his attention from the historian’s difficulties when confronting the absence of testimony, to the historian’s difficulties in engaging with the testimonies of living witnesses.

Memory is not history, as Vidal–Naquet had remarked in the preface to *Assassins of Memory*. “History’s mode of selection functions differently from that of memory and forgetting. Between memory and history, there can be tension and even opposition.”⁵ Each kind of account of the past may claim, on different grounds, to offer a superior account of events—the rawness of real experience versus the critical, analytical overview. So, while the example of Thucydides emphasises that history can cover the same subject matter as living memory, and may even include the historian’s own memories alongside those of others, it also shows that a critical distance is always essential in the historical account, whereas the value of memory is precisely its immediacy and individual character. As Thucydides noted in explaining his historical method at 1.22, “different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories”—and he confessed to his own fallibility in remembering the exact words used by speakers. In other words, people not only hold incorrect beliefs about both the distant past and contemporary history (cf. 1.20–21), but may offer misleading accounts of things that they themselves had experienced. The task of the historian is to recognise this, and through the laborious effort of comparing and criticising different accounts to establish the truth about what happened. A history of recent events must be built on memory and eye-witness accounts—but it cannot take them wholly at face value.

This then creates the possibility of the historian not only contradicting readers’ cherished beliefs and illusions about their own society—we might compare Thucydides’ critique of the Athenian myth of the tyrannicides to historians questioning French beliefs that they were solely the victims of German oppression—but also questioning the veracity of the memory of certain individuals about their own experiences. In a field of study where the testimony of survivors was not only vital but might be accorded a special status this is clearly problematic. Indeed, Vidal–Naquet was writing partly in response to Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film *Shoah*, which insisted on a *Warumverbot*, a refusal to subject the testimony of survivors to the sorts of analytical or critical questions that are the basic duty of the historian, or to engage in any more synthetic reflection on events at all. As Dominick LaCapra observes in his discussion of the film and Vidal–Naquet’s critique, this attitude runs the risk of sacralising the Holocaust and surrounding it with taboos, and indeed provoking a repetition of trauma in the viewer without offering any understanding of it.⁶ However, a decision to favour the sorts of truth offered by a critical historiography over that of an individual’s memory

(4) VIDAL–NAQUET 1995, p. 26.

(5) 1992, p. xxiii.

(6) 1998, p. 100; generally on LANZMANN and VIDAL–NAQUET, p. 98–103.

does not do away with the problem of conflicting duties, towards the truth of events (insofar as it can be recovered and reconstructed) and towards the survivors and their testimony.

Further, that critical distance—the fact that different memories and other evidence are being set against one another, and events considered in wider contexts as a means of understanding—inevitably turns the historical account into an exercise in comparison, which poses challenges for claims about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. LaCapra originally acknowledged that history, as the demythologising form of secular enlightenment, might be seen as the destroyer of more authentic, rich, living memory.⁷ In his later work, however, he sought to argue that “History and memory are modes of inscription that certainly should not be conflated, but neither should they simply be opposed”.⁸ The word “simply” is doing a great deal of work here; of course opposition is not inevitable, but conflict is always a possibility. It can be argued that Vidal–Naquet has a better sense, via Thucydides, of the subversive potential of the critical historical perspective in a society built on memory, and hence of the problematic implications of critical historiography for offering an account of traumatic events.

Vidal–Naquet rejects Lanzmann’s refusal to analyse events as a critical historian should, but nevertheless praises *Shoah* as the only great French historical work on the Holocaust to date. LaCapra suggests that this apparent contradiction is mediated by an analysis of “the way history and art pose questions to each other without ever becoming identical”.⁹ He does not seem to recognise that Vidal–Naquet once again finds the solution to this problem, or at least sees it exemplified, in Thucydides. It is the obligation of the historian “to be both a scholar and an artist. Failing this, he immediately loses a fraction of that truth which he pursues”.¹⁰ Whereas in his arguments about historiography and memory Vidal–Naquet had presented Thucydides in his conventional guise as the archetypal critical historian, an image that had become well established in the nineteenth century, here he echoes the line of interpretation that was sometimes set in opposition to it: Thucydides as the master of historiography as art.¹¹ Whereas the former idea reinforced modern conceptions and practices by providing them with classical origins and legitimation, the latter tended to subvert them, either by revealing that Thucydides was less modern than they supposed, insofar as his work was carefully crafted and highly rhetorical behind its “art of apparent artlessness”—or by suggesting that modern historiography was in fact lacking precisely because of its belief that it could do without art and rhetoric.¹² The historian’s task, on this view, is not only to gather material, assess its reliability and develop a general understanding, but also then to present it to the reader in the most effective way possible, to communicate the truth that has thus been won from the evidence.

Thucydides’ work represents, as numerous readers have observed over the centuries, a masterpiece of historical narrative and representation, employing a wide variety of different techniques to bring events to vivid life at the same time as offering understanding of them; the Holocaust, in Vidal–Naquet’s view, challenges historians to recognise that this is also their duty. He does not develop his reading further, but his choice of different episodes from the history—the massacre of the helots, and the collapse of Corcyra into factionalism and violence—might suggest that he saw Thucydides not only as a model for an artistic historiography in general, but also as a model for the specific problems involved in the representation of trauma and atrocity. The power

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

(8) 2014, p. xx.

(9) 1998, p. 99.

(10) VIDAL–NAQUET 1995, p. 32.

(11) MORLEY 2014 *passim*, especially p. 97–137 on rhetoric and narrative.

(12) Argued most forcefully by ROSCHER 1842, e.g. p. 144–146; quote is from p. 372. Discussed by MORLEY 2012.

of those episodes derives not just from the events themselves, but, especially in the latter case, from the way in which Thucydides represents them.

Vidal-Naquet's interpretation goes beyond the usual discussions of Thucydides' skill in the construction of narrative and the depiction of individual events, vital though those are, to consider the character and sensibility of his account as a whole—and its intended effect on the reader. For a sense of what this might mean, we can look to Saul Friedländer's arguments about the duties of historians in writing about the Holocaust, to pay proper respect to the subject matter and, still more importantly, to take full responsibility for the effects of their accounts on readers.¹³ They must avoid harmonisation, idealization, kitsch and premature "pleasure in narration". The narrative should be interrupted with the voices of victims and with the critical and self-critically reflective commentary of the historian:

Whether commentary is built into the narrative structure of a history or developed as a separate superimposed text is a matter of choice, but the voice of the commentator must be clearly heard. The commentary should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narrative, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusions, withstand the need for closure.

It might seem trite to note Thucydides' explicit disavowal in 1.22 of aesthetic pleasure as a goal of his narrative, preferring to emphasise its truth and usefulness—but this does perfectly fit Friedländer's strictures; the historiography of atrocity must avoid any normalisation of the events it describes, and the reduction of appalling events to something from which a reader should take pleasure is, to say the least, morally dubious.

As Clifford Orwin has argued, Thucydides' world is one in which human bodies are seen to endure pain and indignity, people suffer and are killed, and social bonds are torn to shreds.¹⁴ His account offers multiple perspectives rather than a single totalising view, by shifting the point of view within the narrative of particular events, by moving between different fields of action within the strict chronological framework, and by juxtaposing passages of action and events with speeches that highlight the competing and sometimes contradictory perceptions, expectations and intentions of actors.¹⁵ We are constantly invited to consider counterfactuals: how events might have developed in different circumstances, emphasising the complex interaction of different motives and different evaluations of conditions as well as the roles of contingency and chance. Thucydides' technique might at times be likened to collage: abrupt shifts of perspective and unexpected juxtapositions. Rather than a single voice, we hear a multitude, both perpetrators and future victims of violence. Above all, there is an absolute refusal to close down meaning or assert a single interpretation of events. While the sense of a controlling intelligence is all-pervasive in Thucydides' text, and numerous readers have derived a strong impression of the author's personality and sensibility, there is little explicit authorial commentary. However, there is certainly no question of "leaving the facts to speak for themselves"; rather, we are offered a series of claims about the causes of events and the workings of the world, to be evaluated against the claims put forward by other speakers and against the actual course of events. This is a text that seeks constantly to provoke questions and highlight ambiguity and uncertainty; it withstands the demand for closure at every turn—even, inadvertently, in its lack of a proper ending.¹⁶

Thucydides wrote with a sense of duty: not to recreate past suffering as an end in itself or for the purposes of entertainment or pleasure, and not to impose a single meaning on events or promote a reductionist theory or lesson, but to help his readers understand. His concern with methodology

(13) 1993, p. 132.

(14) ORWIN 1994 and especially 2016.

(15) ROOD 1998 remains basic on Thucydides' narrative techniques.

(16) See RUSTEN 2015.

and other historiographical issues is not, to echo Friedländer's comment, an invitation to narcissism, but a self-conscious insistence on inquiring into the procedures of representation as well as investigation. Indeed, we might see in his account a certain meta-critique of how atrocity can be mobilised for more dubious purposes: Pericles' funeral oration evokes the sacrifice of the deceased not to avoid war but to encourage others to perpetuate it, dismissing the views of those who see things differently—the same dynamic that underpinned the cycles of violence and revenge that play out in Corcyra, Plataea and other unnamed cities.¹⁷

In brief—above all because he lived before the development of the modern discipline—Thucydides can escape the contemporary historians' double-bind: he sees no contradiction between history as science (in the broadest sense) and history as art, or between content and form, and so is at liberty to deploy different literary techniques to represent traumatic events as a means of promoting contemplation and understanding. As Thomas Hobbes recognised early in the tradition of Thucydidean reception, he makes the reader a spectator, placing him right in the heart of events—or even into a vicarious participant. At the same time, he resists—to a degree that many modern readers find deeply disconcerting—any totalising vision, harmonisation or closure.

II. TRAUMATISED HISTORIOGRAPHY

Trauma is precisely the gap, the open wound in the past that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present.¹⁸

Before elevating Thucydides as a model for historians of trauma, however, we need to keep in mind the possibility that he was himself victim and survivor; he wrote about his own trauma—not primarily physical, though we mustn't forget his experience of living through the plague, but the shame of failure and public disgrace, and the pain of exile from his native city—and the trauma of his state and his world. The relevance of his personal experiences for his approach to writing the history of the war is not a completely neglected theme, but it has generally been understood in more or less positive terms: Thucydides' views are taken to carry more weight because of his practical experience in war and politics, because he knew many of the leading individuals and because exile gave him the opportunity to talk to many others on both sides and gather evidence. His personal qualities of impartiality and objective judgement are also demonstrated by his manifest lack of partiality towards or bias against either side, where this might have been expected as a result of either patriotism or resentment at his exile (with the possible exception of his attitude towards Cleon, but that is disputed).¹⁹ The dominant impression offered of Thucydides' personality—obviously an artefact of the imagination of his readers—is cool, calm intellect, sincerity and integrity, immunity to the self-deceptions and uncontrolled emotions that usually plague humanity, in brief a “man without passion”. He is the perfect historian in his freedom from anything that might cloud his judgement and dedication to the truth.

The main exception to this view is Arnold Toynbee's inclusion of Thucydides in his list of “broken lives”: men who had been violently expelled by events from the expected course of their life histories as practical men of action, and who responded by turning to history:

The compulsory withdrawal, which has inhibited the exercise of their abilities on this “practical” plane, has compelled them to find a new vent by transferring their action to another plane and transmuting their energies into a new medium. In prison or internment or exile, the energies that

(17) On the first part of Thucydides' work understood as a critique of Pericles, see FOSTER 2010.

(18) LACAPRA 1998, p. 109.

(19) MORLEY 2014, p. 71–91.

can now no longer discharge themselves in the impact of will upon will have been transmuted from will–power into a heightened intensity of perception and thought and imagination and feeling.²⁰

In the case of Thucydides, Toynbee suggests, the fracture was still greater: he experienced not only a break in his own expected career as a general, but an upheaval that affected his whole world:

[...] the great catastrophe that brought the growth of the Hellenic civilization to an end and set in motion the long and tragic movement of decline and fall. The definite breakdown of the Hellenic Civilization was, in fact, the challenge which the generation of Thucydides had to encounter and the experience through which they had to live, and Thucydides was fully alive to the significance of the catastrophe.²¹

Critical historiography was born out of this trauma: “the passing agony of one unhappy generation of Hellenes who dealt their own Hellas a mortal blow and knew that her blood was on them and on their children has been transmuted by Thucydides, in a great work of art, into an ageless and deathless human experience.”²² There is a significant degree of personal investment and projection in Toynbee’s account; he, like others of his generation, had seen a whole world and its culture torn apart by war, but whereas Thucydides had been prevented from playing a full role in events by his exile, Toynbee had actively shirked it from cowardice.²³ Perhaps this explains why, more or less uniquely—the dominant 19th-century reading, as offered for example by Roscher, was that Thucydides was wholly successful in avoiding any emotional entanglement—Toynbee believed he could detect deep emotion in Thucydides’ account, albeit carefully repressed:

Even the deep emotion which the consciousness of this catastrophe awakens in Thucydides’s soul is so rigorously held in control that we are only made aware of its intensity now and again by the quivering tension which reveals itself, here and there, through the texture of the historian’s calm and measured words.²⁴

Vidal–Naquet’s passing comment that the *stasis* at Corcyra “did leave a permanent impression on this beaten general and politician” offers just a faint echo of Toynbee’s account.²⁵

Toynbee thus proposes that we should see Thucydides’ turn to historiography, and his invention of a particular style of critical investigation that was markedly different from that of his predecessors, as a response to his personal experiences and his participation in a general social collapse. In more modern terms, this suggests an interpretation of his work—both its origins and its eventual form—as a response to trauma. In post-traumatic stress disorder, LaCapra notes, “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them”.²⁶ This creates a tendency to “act out” the past, compulsively reliving it “as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription”; the past continually intrudes into the present, and “hauntingly returns as the repressed”.²⁷

How might we read Thucydides differently in the light of this idea that he wrote as someone suffering from trauma? This perspective certainly raises questions about the reliability of his own memories, and whether he can actually evaluate the accounts of others objectively. Everything becomes material for his compulsive recreation of past experience, with the most traumatic elements emphasised and magnified; his claim that this war was the greatest in history, defined by unparalleled upheaval and suffering, could be taken as clear evidence of a loss of perspective. Above

(20) TOYNBEE 1935, p. 288.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 291.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 292.

(23) Discussed further in Morley forthcoming.

(24) 1935, p. 296. ROSCHER’s comments on Thucydides’ freedom from emotion are from 1842, p. 233–239.

(25) 1995, p. 26.

(26) 1998, p. 109–110.

(27) 2014, p. 70.

all, there is his conviction that events will recur in the future in more or less the same way (1.23), which expresses precisely the cognitive trap that LaCapra discusses. Thucydides compulsively recreates past trauma, individual and above all collective, because he cannot conceive of any escape from the endless cycle of violence. Characters in his work constantly express opinions (clearly Thucydides' own inventions, as scholars have long recognised and he himself admits) about the inevitability of conflict, the eternal dominance of might over right and so forth. This is simply the way the world is, he imagined the Athenians saying at Melos; we didn't invent this principle, and we know it will remain valid long after we're gone; any hope or expectation that things could ever be different is an illusion, a comfort blanket against reality. "The human thing" that Thucydides perceives as driving the ceaseless repetition of the same errors and atrocities is the stuff of nightmares, a reflection of his own unresolved trauma. In brief, what International Relations theorists and other modern readers identify as principles and laws of human behaviour need to be understood instead as symptoms.

However, this bleak and sceptical reading, which reduces all of Thucydides' apparent insights to neurosis, need not represent the final word. The work of LaCapra makes it clear that such acting out in this self-destructive manner is not the only possible response to past trauma, and, more importantly, that a return to the past can also be a means of "working through" trauma and hence coming to terms with it.

To work through problems requires acknowledging them. It also involves an attempt to counteract the tendency to deny, repress or blindly repeat them, and it enables one to acquire critical perspective, allowing for a measure of control and responsible action, notably including a mode of repetition related to the renewal of life in the present.²⁸

In his later work, LaCapra adds the concept of "mourning" as a response to the past that offers a means of transcending its destructive psychological effects:

Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgement and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others... With respect to traumatic losses acting out may well be a necessary condition of working through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all.²⁹

Thucydides' account of his own experiences is the very opposite of narcissistic; he makes no concerted attempt at exculpation, with only a limited gesture towards the possibility that things were largely beyond his control and could have turned out differently. The fact that he largely refers to himself in the third person might be seen as a conscious technique for gaining critical perspective, and he acknowledges the possibility that his own memory could be unreliable. He succeeds in developing sympathy for virtually all participants in events, and manifestly seeks to attain an understanding of the totality of events, not only those which directly concerned him. This is the work of someone who has worked through, at least to a great degree, his own trauma—and of course, if we take seriously his claim that he began to study the war from the beginning, there is a case for seeing his account as itself the working through, not just its end result.

Thucydides explicitly recreates the past for the sake of the present, so that others can learn from it; he may not have fully re-engaged in social and civic life, as LaCapra suggests a full recovery should make possible—the ancient biographies, insofar as they can be trusted, suggest

(28) 1998, p. 54.

(29) 2014, p. 70.

that he led a retired life after his return from exile—but he sought to contribute to it constructively. The depressing perception that events appeared to repeat themselves became for Thucydides an opportunity, that through the careful and critical reconstruction of past events he could teach others, if only a few, to understand the world better. He resists forgetting and glib reductionist explanations—while demonstrating their power in the hands of unscrupulous politicians. The fact that he was writing trauma, mourning the deaths and suffering of many thousands and the defeat not only of Athens but of humanity, may have underpinned the fervour with which he denounced those who took no trouble to gain a true knowledge of past events, who implicitly dishonoured the dead through denial or through misleading, simplistic accounts.

CONCLUSION

Conventional modern academic readings of Thucydides occlude trauma, deliberately or not; they see the events he describes as purely or merely historical, the raw material from which he crafted a reliable narrative or derived general principles of historiography or global politics; in brief, they seek closure. Such readings scarcely explain the capacity of Thucydides' work to capture the imaginations of his readers. Focusing on the theme of trauma allows us to see the ways in which he deploys a range of literary techniques to convey the horrors of the past, as an act of mourning and an attempt at understanding. In this, and in particular in his adoption of formalistic techniques, his work is reminiscent of another favourite author of Pierre Vidal-Naquet, the novelist Georges Perec, and his own attempts at writing about atrocity, about the problems of memory and forgetting.³⁰ But it also allows us to intuit, at the risk of projection and fantasy, the underlying motives of Thucydides' engagement with past trauma; or, if we want to remain properly historical, at least to appreciate the power of Albert Camus' imaginative recreation of a Thucydidean observer and narrator in *La Peste*:

He knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts.³¹

Neville MORLEY
University of Exeter, UK

Bibliography

- Bellos, D., 1993, *Georges Perec: a Life in Words*, London.
- Camus, A., 1948, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gillespie, London, originally published Paris, 1947.
- Foster, E., 2010, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, Cambridge.
- Friedländer, S., 1993, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington IN.
- Fulbrook, M. & Rublack, U., 2010, "In Relation: the 'Social Self' and Ego-Documents", *German History* 283, p. 263–272.
- LaCapra, D., 1998, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, Ithaca.
- , 2014, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2nd ed., Baltimore.

(30) VIDAL-NAQUET 1998, on Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Paris 1975. More generally on Perec, BELLOS 1993.

(31) CAMUS 1948, p. 297.

- Lerner, P. & Micale, M.S., 2001, "Trauma, Psychiatry, and History: a Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction", in Mark S. Micale & Paul Lerner, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930*, Cambridge, p. 1–27.
- Morley, N., 2012, «Thucydides, History and Historicism in Wilhelm Roscher», in Katherine Harloe & Neville Morley, eds., *Thucydides in the Modern World: Reception, Reinterpretation and Influence from the Renaissance to the Present*, Cambridge, p. 115–139.
- , 2014, *Thucydides and the Idea of History*, London.
- , forthcoming, "Legitimising War, Defending Peace: Thucydides in World War I and After", *Classical Receptions Journal*.
- Orwin, C., 1994, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, Princeton.
- , 2016, "Beneath Politics: Thucydides on the Body as the Ground and Limit of the Political Regime", in Ch. R. Thauer & Ch. Wendt (eds.), *Thucydides and Political Order: Concepts of Order and the History of the Peloponnesian War*, London, p. 113–127.
- Rood, T., 1998, *Thucydides: narrative and explanation*, Oxford.
- Roscher, W., 1842, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter des Thukydidés*, Göttingen.
- Rusten, J. S., 2015, "Carving up Thucydides: the Rise and Demise of 'Analysis' and its Legacy", in Christine Lee & Neville Morley (eds.), *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, Malden MA, p. 61–74.
- Toynbee, A. J., 1935, *A Study of History, Volume III*, 2nd edition, Oxford.
- Vidal-Naquet, P., 1992, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. J. Mehlman, New York, originally published Paris, 1987.
- , 1995, "The Holocaust's Challenge to History", trans. R. Butler-Borruat, in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture, and "the Jewish Question" in France*, New York & London, p. 25–34. Originally published in *Les temps modernes*, 1988.
- , 1998, "Auschwitz et l'Atlantide", *Sigila* 2, p. 17–28.