

GREEK HISTORIANS AND GREEK CRITICS

G. M. A. GRUBE

THE BASIC WEAKNESS of ancient criticism is that the critics, rhetorically trained when they were not themselves teachers of rhetoric, concentrated all their attention on stylistic matters, often minutiae. On this subject they are often interesting, but they say very little on the essential nature and qualities of the genre, even of the author they are discussing. They are apt to treat literature as a storehouse of quotations to support their theories. The great exception is of course Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* deals with the essential nature of tragedy and, to a lesser extent, of comedy. His side comments on other genres, however, where he compares them to tragedy, are much less satisfying.

This is particularly true of historiography. Two passages in the *Poetics* deal with it briefly. In the first (1451 b 1) he says:

A poet [i.e., a tragic poet] differs from a historian, not because the former writes verse and the latter prose—the work of Herodotus, if put into verse, would be no less a history in verse than in prose—they differ because the historian tells what happened, the poet what might happen. Poetry is therefore a more philosophic and a more valuable thing than history, for poetry deals in universals while history deals with particulars. Universals are the kind of things which a certain kind of individual would probably or necessarily do or say, . . . the particular is what Alcibiades did or what happened to him.

That the historian must give the facts while the tragic poet (Aristotle had of course no conception of tragedy in prose) is not so restricted is true enough, indeed it is a truism, but it does not take us very far in understanding the art of writing history. Incidentally, we may note that Aristotle saw quite clearly that not all verse is poetry, but he does not pursue that difference here, or indeed elsewhere.¹

A later passage contrasts history and epic. After saying that epic, like tragedy, must have unity of plot, i.e., deal with one complete action with a beginning, middle, and end, Aristotle continues (1459 a 21):

The structure of an epic is therefore not like that of a history. Histories must present not one action but one period of time and all² that happened within it to one or more individuals, however tenuous the connection between the events. The battle of Salamis and that of the Carthaginians in Sicily happened about the same time but had no common purpose, just as events may follow one another in time without any common end in view.

¹He does say, at *Rhet.* 3.1404 a 24, that the language of poetry is different from that of prose, and that poets acquired their reputation through their diction, but he adds with implied approval that contemporary tragedians have given up this kind of poetic language and that it is therefore ridiculous for prose-writers to imitate it.

²We need not overemphasize the all (*δρα*) which would make the statement into an absurdity.

Homer is praised for his plot structure, but the majority of epic writers are blamed for adopting a historical rather than an epic structure; that is, they concentrate on one character or on one period, or on an action with too many parts.

This passage shows a singularly limited view of historiography for a philosopher who must surely have read both Herodotus and Thucydides. It makes no difference between history and chronicle or a calendar of events. It implies that the proper subject of history is either one man or one period of time; it does not allow for concentration on the most relevant facts or for any dramatic presentation of them by speeches, as both the great historians do so effectively; but perhaps in emphasizing the duty of the historians to give the facts Aristotle means to rebuke fourth century historians of the school of Isocrates who had little regard for historical truth. Of course Aristotle's mind is fixed on tragedy, and the remarks on history are purely incidental; had he written on historiography he would no doubt have spoken very differently.

Rhetorike, even in Aristotle's time, was meant to include written as well as spoken prose, but when he divided it into three kinds, forensic, deliberative, and epideictic, he was mainly thinking of oratory, i.e., of speeches before a court, before an assembly, and the display speeches of the Sophists. However, as the influence of Isocrates and the later schools of rhetoric increased, and teachers of rhetoric took all prose as their province, all prose writing which did not fit into the first two well-defined classes came to be regarded as epideictic.

Both Herodotus and Thucydides continued to be popular and influential in the early Hellenistic centuries,³ as history came increasingly under the influence of two different and almost opposite forces, the growing antiquarianism of the time on the one hand and rhetoric on the other. Different historians were influenced by one or the other, though the two could be found in the same writer. So we find Polybius, who attacks Timaeus of Tauromenium on almost every other count, recognizing Timaeus' care in collecting evidence and consulting documents, especially in matters of chronology, and in the working out of a general chronology for Greece based on the Olympiads, and fitting the chronology of the different cities, the archons of Athens, the kings of Sparta, and so on, into it. This was perhaps Timaeus' main claim to fame (Polyb. 12. 10-11).

Not unnaturally, the most popular histories were most influenced by rhetoric; they wrote to please their readers and to stir their emotions, until they came to write what has been called "tragic history." This was severely criticized, notably by Polybius. As he says when condemning Phylarchus' sensationalism (2.56.11-12):

³See Oswyn Murray, "Herodotus and Hellenistic history," *CQ* 22 (1972) 200-213.

The purpose of tragedy is not the same as that of history, but its opposite. Tragedy must use the most persuasive words to amaze and beguile its audience for the moment; history must persuade and instruct for ever by truth of word and deed those who are eager to learn; in tragedy persuasion and illusion reign even without truth, whereas it is because of its truth that history benefits the student.

Unfortunately we do not possess any critical texts of the third or second century B.C., with one probable exception, the treatise known as Demetrius *On Style*, which was traditionally attributed to Demetrius of Phalerum; its content at any rate cannot be later than the second century.⁴ In his introductory discussion of sentence structure, Demetrius recognizes three kinds of periods in the order of their complexity: the conversational, the historical, and the rhetorical. He obviously means that the second is suitable to history, and that the other two are not, neither the conversational which is "still looser and simpler than the historical and scarcely shows itself to be a period at all," nor the more involved rhetorical. There is also an even looser and/or non-periodic kind of sentence used by "the old writers" like Hecataeus and "most of Herodotus" where "the clauses are thrown together" without being integrated into periods at all. He quotes the first sentence of Herodotus as an example of a simple or single-clause period, and the first sentence of Xenophon's *Anabasis* as a good example of a historical period. We may reasonably deduce from this that he dislikes involved rhetorical periods in history, that he considers a good deal of Herodotus too loose in sentence structure and a good deal of Thucydides too involved. Xenophon is quoted with approval throughout.

The rest of the treatise discusses Demetrius' unique formula of four styles. These are, in the order in which they are dealt with: the grand or impressive (μεγαλοπρεπής, 38-127), the elegant or polished (γλαφυρός, 128-189), the simple or plain (ἴσχνος, 190-239), and the forceful (δεινός, 240-304). Each is discussed under three heads: the choice of words,

⁴ I still believe *On Style* to have been written, probably at Alexandria, in the second quarter of the third century B.C. See my *A Greek Critic: Demetrius on Style* (Toronto 1961) and "The Date of Demetrius On Style" in *Phoenix* 18 (1964) 294-302. For a contrary opinion see M. D. Schenkeveld, *Studies On Demetrius On Style* (Amsterdam 1964). He accepts some of my arguments for the earlier date, notably that there is no trace in the treatise of the problems which agitated the minds of the critics of the first century B.C. or A.D. On the other hand, he is more impressed than I am by the linguistic arguments for a later date. To avoid this dilemma he imagines the author to have been, in the first century A.D., "a traditionally minded young man writing down lectures given by an old tutor who repeats his own teacher," both of them ignoring the theories of their own time. To assume the existence of two such ivory tower rhetoricians in two succeeding generations seems both fanciful and improbable. Schenkeveld's other suggestion, of a young author relying entirely on one or more second century treatises, is no more likely. Both suggestions, I think, underrate the quality of Demetrius' mind. In any case he admits that the *content* of the treatise dates at least from the second century B.C.

word-arrangement, and subject matter, as well as qualities and figures appropriate to each. No author is identified with any particular style, as writers use different effects at different times and what is avoided in one style may be desirable in another. So we have an example of impressiveness from Herodotus (66), but another example tells us how he avoided it (44). He is said to attain elegance through the unobtrusive rhythms of his prose (as do Plato, Xenophon, and Demosthenes), a type of elegance which Thucydides avoids (191), and there is an interesting contrast in their use of poetic words (112-113):

Even a blind man can see, as the saying is, that poetic language gives a certain grandeur to prose, except that some writers imitate the poets quite openly, or rather they do not imitate them as much as transpose their words into their own work, as Herodotus does. When Thucydides, on the other hand, takes over some expression from a poet, he uses it in his own way and makes it his own.

Most of the approved quotations from Thucydides occur, as one would expect, under the impressive or grand style, as his more complex sentence structures do not make for the clarity which is characteristic of the plain style (202-206). Xenophon, on the other hand, is commended for his elegance, though once he is criticized for obscurity (198).

In the section on the forceful style most of the examples are taken from Demosthenes or Demades. Two historians are mentioned as *not* attaining forcefulness, namely Theopompus (247, cp. 27) because of his excessive use of Isocratean antitheses and homoeoteleuta, and Cleitarchus because of his bombastic use of words (304).

Demetrius defends Ctesias vigorously against the charge of repetitive verbosity and says that he attained vividness this way (212-216). He even calls Ctesias a poet, though the examples he gives are not very compelling, and Philistus' style is condemned as obscure, because of his oblique constructions (198).

We have to turn to Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the late first century B.C. for the fullest discussion of historians, Herodotus and Thucydides in particular. Dionysius himself, in the *Letter to Pompey*, quotes a comparison of them from his earlier work *On Imitation*. Here the rhetorical formulae are rather mechanically applied: Herodotus is said to be better in the handling of subject matter; he chose a nobler subject; he begins and ends better; he refreshes his audience with digressions; and his material is better arranged. Thucydides' chronological exposition by summers and winters is said to break all continuity. Also, Herodotus has a better attitude to his subject: he rejoices at Greek successes whereas Thucydides has a grudging attitude towards Athens, no doubt due to his exile. In qualities of style they are more nearly equal: both have purity of language; Herodotus is more lucid, Thucydides more brief, but, Dionysius adds, brevity should be accompanied by lucidity; both are vivid; Thucydides is better at passionate expression but Herodotus depicts

character better; Thucydides' language has more power, but Herodotus' has more persuasiveness and charm; Herodotus is more natural, Thucydides more forceful; Herodotus uses language more appropriate to the circumstances or the speaker while that of Thucydides is always the same, especially in the speeches.

Dionysius then says that Xenophon tried to imitate Herodotus and did so successfully in dealing with subject matter and in the charm of his language, but he does not have the beauty, loftiness, or appropriateness of his model. Philistus, on the other hand, modelled himself on Thucydides and like him is wanting in variety, but he is far inferior in beauty of language; at times his style is monotonous and his speeches are poor. He is pleasant enough, however, and is a better model for forensic orators than Thucydides.

Theopompus is then commended for his choice and arrangement of subject matter, his care in collecting evidence, his philosophic attitude, and his examining of hidden motives. He has more force and pungency than Isocrates, and in this is the equal of Demosthenes, but his digressions are irrelevant and rather childish, and he is too much under the influence of his teacher Isocrates in the use of balanced clauses, the avoidance of hiatus, and the like.

The major work of Dionysius is his *περὶ συνθέσεως*, *On Word Order*, and the difference word order makes in the sound of words in collocation, in the rhythm, and in sentence structure. He rewrites (ch. 4) a sentence of Herodotus in the manner of Thucydides to show how important these things are, then in the manner of Hegesias to show how bad the result can be, all without changing a single word but merely their order. He quotes at length from Herodotus' story of Gyges (1.8-10) to prove that the simplest words can make graceful and pleasing prose when carefully arranged. A writer, he tells us, should aim at two things, beauty and charm (*ἡδονή*). These are not the same, for the style of Thucydides has beauty certainly but no charm, while Xenophon and Ctesias have great charm, but not much beauty. Herodotus has both. To show that the rhythm of Thucydides' prose has grandeur and dignity he analyzes in detail the rhythms of the first sentences of the Funeral Speech, and the historian is also commended for the variety of his sentence structures. As for writers who neglect word-order, no one has the patience to read through them, and among these he mentions Phylarchus, Duris, and Polybius.

Dionysius fully realizes that style is as individual as one's features, but nevertheless word arrangement can be classed under three generic types: the austere or rugged, the smooth or elegant, and the intermediate or mixed. In the first style of word-arrangement the words stand out, harsh collocations are not avoided, large wide-stepping words lengthen the rhythm, clauses are not carefully balanced nor hiatus avoided, the

periods are of unstudied length, there are many changes of cases and figures, articles are often omitted, and grammatical sequence often neglected. This is the style of Thucydides, and the first twenty five lines of so of the *History* are analyzed in great detail in illustration of this.

The opposite of this is the smooth or elegant word-arrangement. Here the words are euphonious and merge into one another without clash or pause, the clauses are carefully balanced, as is the period, the end of which is clearly marked. No passage is without periods, no period without clauses, no clauses without symmetry. All archaic, stately, weighty figures are avoided. This is of course the style of Isocrates and, to a lesser extent, of Ephorus and Theopompus. The initial passage of Isocrates' *Areopagiticus* is then carefully analyzed in illustration.

The intermediate style of word-arrangement, which Dionysius somewhat confusedly calls both a mean and a mixture of the other two, is to him the best. It is the style of Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes and, predictably, of Herodotus. It should be kept clearly in mind that these are styles or types of word-arrangement only, and this formula should never be confused with the general three-style formula so common in later authors.

Dionysius' essay on Thucydides, on the other hand, deals with the whole subject of style and applies the same formula as we saw in the earlier comparison with Herodotus. If the picture of Thucydides he draws here—that of a historian who finds the subjects of earlier historians too restricted and the subject of Herodotus too broad and so picks for himself a subject that will be neither one nor the other—seems a trifle simple-minded, at least the moralistic strictures for choosing a war disastrous to Greece are no longer there, and Dionysius shows some notion of the development of historical writing and historical style. He commends the historian for banishing the mythical and the supernatural from his history (ch. 7) and shows a much greater appreciation of his devotion to the truth (ch. 8). The sections on the arrangement of material are interesting. Dionysius still objects to the chronological arrangement by seasons as fragmenting the narrative of events, and to illustrate this he analyses the structure of the third book with some care. He also objects to the structure of the first book as confused and illogical, and shows how Thucydides should, in his opinion, have proceeded; he should have told his readers at once what he considered the real cause of the war and not have left this so very late. All this, whether we agree with it or not, is fair criticism.

So is the charge that Thucydides deals at length with certain events of relatively little importance and very briefly with some important events. The story of Sphacteria is one of the former, and the success of Nicias at Cythera (4.53-54) one of the latter; and one may compare the space given to the capture of Melos to that given to the capture of Scione.

The famous funeral speech (*ὁ περιβόητος ἐπιτάφιος*) was made after a minor engagement with very few losses. We may say that Dionysius is singularly blind to the dramatic purposes of Thucydides, but he would probably have replied that history is not drama. He is of course perfectly right in his contention that Thucydides treats some events at length for other than strictly historical reasons.

When he deals with the actual style of Thucydides (ch. 21) Dionysius bases it on the usual division into the choice and the arrangement of words. We have already seen him deal with these, and it may be enough here to quote his own summary (ch. 24):

His most obvious characteristics are: the attempt to express very many things in very few words, and to pack many meanings into one word, leaving his readers expecting more. Hence his brevity becomes obscure. To sum up, four factors go to make up the Thucydidean style: poetic diction, diversity of figures, rugged word-order, and rapidity of expression. The qualities which give it colour are: harshness, compactness, pungency, ruggedness, gravity, forcefulness, awesomeness and, beyond all these, passionate intensity. These mark him out from other writers. When his talent matches his intention, the result is completely right and inspired, but when it falls short and the intensity is not kept up throughout, the rapidity of his narrative makes him obscure, and some other unseemly defects make their appearance.

The second half of the essay consists of quotations and analyses to support his judgments. These are extremely apt and interesting. He quotes at length the famous description of the last battle in the harbour of Syracuse (7.69–72), and for this passage he has only the highest praise (ch. 27). Then, by way of contrast, he turns to the notorious chapters on the Corcyra revolution and the then state of Greece (3.81–83), and here his verdict is very different. This is condemned as Thucydides at his most obscure, and the clause by clause analysis is fascinating to anyone who has ever struggled through the tortured prose of these difficult chapters.⁵

Dionysius then criticizes some of the speeches as to the appropriateness of the sentiments expressed. He praises those of the Plataeans to the Spartans in the second and third book, but the Melian dialogue is too much for him. Such impious sentiments could not have been spoken by an Athenian, they would be more appropriate on the lips of a barbarian

⁵All is well through chapter 81, but what follows is said to be awkward, ungrammatical, with twisted structures never used before or since. We can trace three stages: in the first Dionysius quotes a particular clause or phrase and comments, "What he wants to say is" (*ὃ βούλεται λέγειν*), and then puts the meaning in simple terms. Although expressions are said to be unnecessarily abstract and complex, things are not too bad up to 82.5, and "if he had stopped there he would not have been so offensive," but things get even worse, and the comment is, "we guess that this is what he means," but in the end Dionysius confesses himself baffled: "this is said in a brief and contorted manner and the meaning is not apparent." Then he ends with a long quotation (82.8 to the end of 83), and says he will add no comments. They are unnecessary!

king. The speech of Pericles in the first book (140–144) is very good, but his second speech in the second book (60–64) is not, because no practised politician would be so self-righteous and so reproachful when trying to conciliate an angry crowd, nor would he use such artificial and obscure language. This is just Thucydides giving us his idea of what Pericles would have been justified in saying.

The essay ends with some quotations from Demosthenes to illustrate the qualities which he learnt from the historian, while avoiding his excesses.

So much from Dionysius. The treatise *On The Sublime* or, as I prefer to call it, *On Great Writing*,⁶ presents us with a paradox. Longinus is the most sensitive and illuminating critic in antiquity and never allows the rhetorical formulae to dominate him, but he follows the customary practice of only short quotations from various authors to illustrate a particular point or figure. The quotations, moreover, are not meant to be characteristic of their authors as a rule, and one gets the impression that he used the first quotation that came to his mind. When he quotes a successful vulgarism from Herodotus (31) or blames him for using a trivial word (43) or a frigid phrase (4), he does not mean to imply that vulgar language or frigidity is characteristic of Herodotus. The numerous quotations therefore, while they contribute to our understanding of Longinus' idea of greatness and his four sources of it, do not contribute much to our understanding of the authors quoted. He does, of course, occasionally make statements of a more general kind, as when he calls Herodotus "most Homeric," or says that Thucydides, whom he consistently numbers among the great, is overfond of hyperbata, or that people laugh at the bombastic and turgid language of Callisthenes and even more at the bombastic language of Cleitarchus, but we should be careful not to draw general conclusions from his specific quotations. There is in fact very little in Longinus which is relevant to our present purpose.

These then are the main critical remarks to be found about the historians in the ancient Greek critics, and they concern their style. For a general discussion of historiography as a genre, the duty of the historian, and the qualities he should possess, we must turn not to the critics but to the historians themselves, to such passages as chapters twenty to twenty two in the first book of Thucydides, to Polybius in the twelfth book and elsewhere. But the great historians are great writers as well, and from this point of view the critics' discussions of their style do help us to a fuller understanding of them.

TORONTO

⁶For the probable date and author of this treatise see my annotated translation, *Longinus On Great Writing* (Library of Liberal Arts, now Bobbs Merrill, 1957).