Scale Matters

Compression, Expansion, and Vividness in Thucydides

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Introduction

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Scale matters and in Thucydides it not only matters, it perplexes. In antiquity it puzzled Dionysius of Halicarnassus, or rather provoked his condemnation of Thucydides as lazy:

> ... In the elaboration (*exergasia*) of his chapters he is rather carless, either giving more space to matters that demand less or else indolently treating in a cursory manner matters that require more detailed treatment... . (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *On Thucydides* 13, translated by W. K. Pritchett)

Before joining Dionysius in his criticisms we need to ask *how* expansion and contraction are achieved in Thucydides' work, that is, what techniques are used— and why. And while we are at it, we must ask what effects such changes of scale have on the alert reader of this extraordinary work.

The investigation of scale in Thucydides cannot be detached from what can be made out about rhetorical theory in his day. Scale was a matter of concern among contemporary rhetoricians, as may be inferred from Plato's comments about various teachers of rhetoric:

> Tisias and Gorgias ... make small things seem great and great things small by the power of speech, ... and ... invented conciseness (*suntomia*) of speech and measureless length on all subjects ... And once when Prodicus heard these inventions, he laughed and said that he alone had discovered the art of proper speech, that discourses should be neither long nor short, but of reasonable length (*metria*).
> (*Phaedrus* 267 b, translated by H. N. Fowler, modified)

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This concern with the proper length of a speech is also reflected in the Funeral Oration, where Thucydides has Pericles refer to commonly held views about scale:

> ... The friend [of a deceased warrior] who is familiar with every facet of the story may think that some point has not been set forth with that fullness which he wishes and knows it to deserve. (2.35.2) (Here and in most places in this essay I follow the translation of R. Crawley).

It is not, perhaps, a great leap from the orator's podium to the historian's study. Indeed, A. J. Woodman (1988), among others, has shown in some detail the similarities between Thucydides' narrative technique and the instruction offered by his contemporaries, the Sophists. There are, moreover, striking resemblances between Thucydides' practice and some of the doctrines set forth by rhetoricians of a much later date. For that reason, I have added references to the useful collection of material in Lausberg 1998 whenever they seem apposite.

Yet, caution is in order, since the rhetoricians did not always agree with one another, nor do their rules adequately characterize Thucydidean practice. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War does not, for example, show many signs of being shaped by Prodicus' Goldilocks- like preference for a "just right" balance between fullness and compression. Scale in Thucydides varies greatly from episode to episode; the challenge is to determine why and to what effect

Nor will it do to emphasize Thucydides' "conciseness" (*suntomia*), without looking closely at passages where actions are described with great detail and vividness. To be sure, Thucydides' work contains many passages written with great conciseness, for example:

> ... Eurylochus lodged the hostages in Kytinion, in Doris, and advanced upon Naupactus through the country of the Locrians. On his way he seizes Oineon and Eupalion, two of the towns that refused to join him. Arriving in the territory of Naupactus, and having now been joined by the Aetolians, the army laid waste the land and took the suburb of the town, which was unfortified; and after this they seize Molykreion, also a Corinthian colony subject to Athens. (3.102.1)

Every stage of the operation presented opportunities for expansion— more precise chronological indicators, closer attention to the army's route, or the presentation of vivid details. The narration is clear; fast paced; unencumbered by speeches, sensory detail, or stylistic embellishment. If we take such passages as a baseline for gauging scale in Thucydides' writing, many passages will be equally succinct, a few more highly compressed, and some greatly expanded.

Variation in scale is especially striking when two ostensibly similar situations are treated in different ways, as, for example, in the Athenian punishments of Aegina and of Mytilene. Mytilene fills fourteen chapters of Book 3, including the famous debate between Cleon and Diodotus, and culminates in a life- or- death race of triremes with

conflicting orders to the Athenian commander there—t he result is a hairbreadth escape for the Mytilenean citizenry, but death for the ringleaders of the rebellion (3.50.1). Here scale is reinforced by intertwining the Mytilene and Plataean episodes in a complex structure (Connor 1984, 253), as if in a hall of mirrors.

By contrast, Thucydides' treatment of the Aeginetans is of a different order of magnitude, and occurs in a loose sprawl of narrative. After a succinct account of the expulsion of the Aeginetans from their native island and their relocation to Thyrea in the Peloponnese (2.27), the story temporarily stops, to be resumed in Book 4 (Chapters 56– 57). There it seems at first just another incident in Athenian naval operations in the region: they sack and burn Thyrea. The Athenian commanders capture some of the Aeginetans and send them to Athens, where, along with a Spartan commander and prisoners from Cythera, they were put to death (4.57.4). The report of these operations is powerful but succinct, taking just twenty- eight lines in the Oxford Classical Text, a small fraction of the space devoted to Mytilene. To be sure, Thyrea (though not Aegina) had less strategic value than Mytilene, but that may not be the full explanation of the differences in treatment. A similar discrepancy in scale emerges if one compares this account of the Aeginetans with that of the Melians at the end of Book 5. Since Melos was not of great strategic significance, something else must account for the attention it receives.

Variations in scale are not uncommon in Thucydides, as Carolyn Dewald's book (2005) makes clear. To understand the significance of such variation, however, we need to examine the techniques of expansion and compression in the work, and observe the contexts in which they occur and the effects that follow from them.

Methods of Expansion and Compression

Compression

Let us begin with compression, and with a caution: Thucydides may have passed quickly over some episodes because he did not yet have the detailed information he was always looking for; that may be the case, for example, at the beginning of Book 8. For a long time he was an exile, cut off from some sources of information. His work, moreover, is incomplete, and in some places clearly lacking final revision. In other places, however, the compression is clearly deliberate:

> During the same summer different operations were carried on by the different belligerents in Sicily; by the Siceliots themselves against each other, and by the Athenians and their allies. I shall however confine myself to the actions in which the Athenians took part, choosing the most important (*logou malista axia*). (3.90.1)

Compression, however, is not simply omission. It can also be a way of advancing the author's interpretation of events. Indeed, in Thucydides the scale of an episode is often

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an indicator of its importance. A fully detailed account, as we shall see, mirrors the importance of an episode; per contra, brevity can signal that an ostensibly important event is less significant than commonly thought. That seems to be the message in the contrast drawn between the Persian and the Peloponnesian wars:

> The Median war, the greatest achievement of past times, yet found a speedy decision in two actions by sea and two by land. The Peloponnesian war was prolonged to an immense length, and long as it was it was short without parallel for the misfortunes it brought upon Hellas. (1. 23.1)

The first of these two sentences is a tour de force of compression. It uses the grammatical form of the dual to reduce two Persian attacks, quite different in nature and separated by a decade, into two pairs of battles, two infantry and two naval. By minimizing the Persian wars, Thucydides in effect magnifies the significance of his own subject matter.

The comparison advances the goal of the introductory section of the work, the so-called Archaeology, by emphasizing the greatness of Thucydides' subject matter. Once this greatness is well established, Thucydides can turn to another goal, demonstrating the growth of Athenian power in the years between the Persian and the Peloponnesian wars. Compression, in other words, is a way of advancing Thucydides' goals, and also helps him avoid a potential conflict between these goals. The battle fought near the river Eurymedon in the mid- 460s bce was one of the largest and most dramatic battles of the fifth century. This Athenian victory is a useful indicator of the growth of Athenian power, but its presentation must not be allowed to distract the reader from the recognition that the Peloponnesian War was even greater. Thucydides deals with this problem by providing only the basic facts without adding an exact chronology or vivid details. Nor does he discuss the strategic rationale for the battles, or their military and diplomatic consequences:

> Next we come to the actions by land and by sea at the river Eurymedon, between the Athenians with their allies, and the Medes, when the Athenians won both battles on the same day, under the command of Cimon son of Miltiades and captured and destroyed the whole Phoenician fleet, consisting of two hundred vessels. (1.100.1)

The narrative then moves directly on to the rebellion of Thasos and other events in the Thraceward region, told at considerably greater length (1.100.2– 101.2) than the Eurymedon account. At this point Thucydides provides succinct but adequate indication of the goals of Athenian operations, and the sensational detail of a secret

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Spartan promise to invade Attica. By the time we have read about Thasos, Eurymedon is almost eclipsed.

Other methods of compression are used as well, for example, the evocation of earlier passages, as in the account of the revolt of Scione in 4.120.3 where Brasidas "spoke to the same effect as at Acanthus and Torone," but added further arguments. The effect is to avoid redundancy and speed the reader ahead to another speech by Brasidas (4.126) and to the vivid narrative that follows.

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A similar technique, allusion, can also yield useful results. In his treatment of the Megarian Decree, the episode that many have considered the spark that set off the great war, Thucydides never gives a full account of the matter; instead he introduces the decree obliquely: we first hear of it through an allusion in a speech of Corinthian ambassadors seeking to avert a conflict with Athens:

> It were, rather, wise [for you Athenians] to try to counteract the unfavorable impression that your conduct toward Megara has created. For kindness opportunely shown has a greater power of removing old grievances than the facts of the case may warrant. (1.42.2)

This allusive presentation allows Thucydides to mention the *cause célèbre* without magnifying its significance or undermining his thesis that "the truest prophasis I consider to be the one which was least talked about— that the Athenians were growing great ..." (1.23.6). Compressing the Megarean affair into allusions is a skillful way of advancing Thucydides' interpretive agenda.

Thucydides is not alone in such uses of compression. Ancient rhetoricians gave considerable attention to "minimization." (Much of the evidence is collected by Lausberg 1998, sec. 259 and 1070.1; see also Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.18.4, Bonitz p. 1391b.) Some of these writers refer to it as *to meioun*, contrasting it with *to auxein*, to augment or expand. The *Rhetoric for Alexander*, preserved among the works of Aristotle, however, uses what seems to me a more revealing term, *tapeinōsis*, "lowering" or "minimization," when discussing "the minimization of creditable qualities and the amplification of discreditable ones" (1425b 37, translated by Rackham). Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.3.48) and many other rhetoricians treated such "lowering" as a matter of style (Lausberg 1998, sec. 1238.1), that is the use of low-class speech, but the *Rhetoric for Alexander* seems to view it more broadly, and more in keeping with Thucydidean attention to the scale of the narrative.

The techniques of minimization help Thucydides avoid a trap into which orators and rhetoricians sometimes fall—b y attempting to refute views with which they disagree, inadvertently calling attention to them. His pattern is to pass over them as quickly as possible.

Behind the techniques of compression which we have observed in Thucydides can be detected a tacit mimetic principle—t hat the scale of presentation should be proportionate to the significance of the episode within Thucydides' interpretive

framework. If this suggestion is correct, matters Thucydides considered minor should receive little space, even if commonly regarded as highly important. Conversely, increased scale should be a way of emphasizing what Thucydides deemed most significant. This suggestion can be tested by examining episodes in which Thucydides' techniques of expansion are put to use.

Expansion

Thucydides' techniques of expansion can shape long sections of the text, or require only a few deft words. In either case their effects can be significant. For example, the 216

staccato effect of a string of coordinating conjunctions, can "make even small things great" (Demetrius, *On Style* 54, cf. 63). The effect of such polysyndeton can be greater than that achieved by subordination, as some ancient rhetoricians (Lausberg 1998, sec. 686) were well aware, and as modern readers can readily detect: for example, in the staccato opening of the speech of Archidamus in 1.80. Similarly, the addition of a short phrase, such as "in the ninety- third year after they became allies of the Athenians"— can increase the force of an otherwise formulaic phrasing, in this case the rounding- off formula in 3.68.5 for the end of the siege of Plataea. The expansion drives home the failure of the Athenians to rescue their loyal ally. Another form of expansion, the addition of a superlative, can underline the significance of an ostensibly routine operation, as in 2.31.2, when Thucydides notes that the Athenian expedition of 431 bce was the largest (*megiston dē*), thereby emphasizing the observation that follows, that the city was still at its height and had not yet been afflicted by the plague.

Litotes (Lausberg 1998, sec. 586–8 8), in some ways a mirror image of the superlative, can be used in similar ways, as when, in the account of the Corcyrean *stasis* (3.81.5), the phrase "nothing that did not happen" (*ouden hoti ou xunebē*), makes the point that everything possible *did* happen. Thucydides then adds a pleonasm (Lausberg 1998, sec. 859) "and even more." There are many more such "figures of speech," or *tropoi*, that result in expansion in Thucydides, not least hyperbaton (or *huperbasis*), as we shall soon see.

To the modern reader such tropes, or figures of speech, (Lausberg 1998, sec. 552–98), may seem strained and pointless, at best a trivial ornament. Among the ancients, however, they came to be recognized as means of making a presentation more compelling. They do this in part by setting the emotional register of a passage that often depends less on word choice than on the arrangement of the words chosen. Hence figures of speech can signal the intensification of emotion in a passage, and help bring it to life in the minds and hearts of the audience. In Thucydides such figures are not decorative; the shaping of language is closely tied to the shaping of reader reaction to situations Thucydides deemed of great significance.

Expansion through such tropes regularly achieves the mimetic effect we have expected— it increases the scale of important episodes. Big matters (*ta megala*)

receive big treatment. In Thucydides, however, greatness is not identical with strategic significance. Sometimes ostensibly minor episodes are greatly expanded, especially, it turns out, when they involve great suffering (*pathos*).

It is important, then, as we examine the other end of the spectrum of expansionary techniques, that is, those that involve more than a few words or brief turns of phrase, to be alert to the question of what Thucydides presented as truly great about the war. The most obvious of these larger-s cale expansions are speeches, dialogues, addresses to troops or political assemblies, represented as direct quotation, or paraphrased in indirect discourse. Such speeches often occur in contrasting pairs (antilogies), as in the debates determining the fate of Plataea and Mytilene in Book 3, or sometimes in a triad, as when the Athenians argue about the Sicilian expedition in 6.9–2 3. The triad underlines the strategic significance of the decision, but expansion through direct discourse can also heighten the pathos of a passage. As Dionysius of Halicarnassus noted,

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Thucydides' writing in some expanded passages "makes the suffering appear so cruel, so terrible, so piteous, as to leave no room for historians or poets to surpass him" (*Thuc*. 15).

The following sections of this essay will concentrate on three other forms of expansion (day- by- day narrative, vividness, and "reprise') in the work, and then examine the cumulative effect of expansionary techniques in one major episode.

Day- by- Day Narration

Thucydides can compress into a sentence or two military operations that must have taken several days, weeks, or even a whole campaign season, as he does in his account of the fourth Peloponnesian invasion of Attica (3.1). Such passages reflect the routine of war and let the reader move on to more revealing matters. Sometimes, however, Thucydides' narrative becomes more granular, providing a day- by- day or even hour-by- hour account. That is the case, for example, in the buildup to the account of the Corcyrean *stasis* in 3.70 ff. At first, events flow without chronological indicators, but that changes in 3.72.3 with "Night coming on...." Day- by- day narrative follows: "The next day passed in skirmishes" (3.73.1); "After a day's interval" (3.74.1); "On the next day" (3. 75.1). And with day-b y- day narrative comes tense shifts, in and out of the historical present. The ancient rhetoricians (Lausberg 1998, sec. 814, relying on Quintilian *Institutes* 9.2.41) called such shifting of tenses *metastasis* and recognized its close connection to vividness (*enargeia*), as can be seen in the account of the battle between the oligarchs and the demos in the city of Corcyra itself:

After a day's interval hostilities recommence and the demos is victorious ... the women also valiantly assisted, pelting with tiles from the house and they endured the din of battle with a fortitude beyond their sex.... Towards dusk the oligarchs ...

set fire to the houses around the market- place, and the lodging- houses ... (3.74.1–2)

Expansion through day-b y- day narration allows the inclusion of sensory detail, and hence for increased vividness, the next mode of expansion to be examined.

Vividness (*Enargeia*, Latin *Evidentia*)

Vivid sensory detail is not restricted to day-b y- day narrative. One finds it, for example, in the description of the plague in Athens, with bodies piled one upon another and with half dead people reeling in the streets and converging on the fountains in their desperate search for water (2.52.2). Such vividness came to be thought characteristic of the work:

> The most effective historian is the one who makes his narrative like a painting by giving a visual quality to the sufferings and characters. Thucydides certainly always strives after this vividness (*enargeia*) in his writing, eagerly trying to transform

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> his reader into a spectator and to let the sufferings (*pathē*) that were so shocking (*ekplēktika*) and disorienting (*taraktika*) to those who beheld them have a similar effect on those who read about them. (Plutarch *De glor. Ath.* 3, *Moralia* 347a)

Ancient rhetoricians, and more recently Woodman (1988) and Zanker (1981), recognized the value and emotional power of "vividness" (Lausberg 1998, sec. 810–1 9). It provided a way to make the reader into an eyewitness. In doing so, it depends on *phantasia*, the ability to call up visual images, a capacity that Longinus describes as "where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it ... before the eyes of your audience" (*On the Sublime* 15.2, translated by Fyfe). Quintilian shows that process in action:

> Shall we not turn [daydreaming] to our advantage? I make a complaint that a man has been murdered; shall I not bring before my eyes everything that is likely to have happened when the murder occurred? Shall not the assassin suddenly sally forth? Shall not the other tremble, cry out, supplicate or flee? Shall I not behold the one striking, the other falling? Shall not the blood, and paleness, and last gasp of the expiring victim present itself fully to my mental view? 32. Hence will result that *enargeia*, which is called by Cicero "illustration" and "evidentness," which seems not so much to narrate as to exhibit, and our feelings will be moved not less strongly than if we were actually present at the affairs of which we are speaking. (Quintilian *Inst.* 6.2.30ff., translated by Watson)

Enargeia is clearly a powerful tool for the orator and advocate. For the historian it is a way of enhancing his authority, since readers who feel themselves eyewitnesses are ready to believe what they have been made to see. And seeing it is, for while the other senses have their place, vision is preeminent. As Aristotle noted, "... hearing is a duller perception than sight, and consequently the effects (*pathē*) arising from it are superficial ... But since sight is the most vivid (*enargeitatēs ousēs*) of all the senses, the effects produced by it are correspondingly great (*Problemata* 7. 886b 33 ff., translated by Hett, modified).

To be sure, other senses also contribute to the vividness of Thucydidean narrative. Sound has a powerful role, as in the loud noise (*psophos*), which induced the panic at Lekythos (4.115.3), the shout (*boē*) in 4.34.2, and the crashing together of ships (*ktypos*) in 7.70. These can create consternation, *ekplēxis*. Thirst (e.g., 2.52.2) is powerful as well; and smell is perhaps the worst of all (7.87.2), or is it the taste of cannibalism (2.70.1)?

In Thucydides' day how fully developed was rhetorical theory about *enargeia* and similar techniques, and to what extent was he guided by it? One must be very cautious since the use of *enargeia* in the criticism of poetry cannot be attested before the second century bce, as Zanker (1981, 306 f.) has shown. Still, the earliest appearance of the word, in Plato's *Politicus* 277c, suggests that not long after Thucydides the term was in use as a way of evaluating speech.

There is, moreover, a connection between vivid narration and one feature of Thucydides' distinctive approach to investigating the past and presenting it to his readers— his emphasis on *akribeia*, getting the details right. The importance of *akribeia*

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and related terms in Thucydides' methodology has been recognized in Thucydidean studies: for example, in Crane (1996). Although Thucydides does not use *akribeia* to characterize the narrative that results from his investigations, the *enargeia* of his account may be a byproduct of *akribeia*; that is, the hard work of getting the details right may also yield the material needed for a vivid account. Demetrius may hint at that in his treatise on style:

> ... vividness ... arises from an exact narration (*ex akribologias*), overlooking no detail and cutting out nothing." (Sec. 208, translated by Fyfe)

Reprise

Sometimes Thucydides' treatment of an episode seems to come close to completion and then start again with new intensity. By analogy to music, one might call this "reprise," not, however, as exact repetition, but as resumption after an apparent culmination or near resolution. From time to time Thucydidean narratives seem to

approach completion, then resume, restating and intensifying themes already introduced and developed. The defeat of the Athenians by the Aetolians near Aegitium (3.98) provides a good illustration. The description of the defeat culminates in the words "and falling into pathless gullies and places that they were unacquainted with, thus they perished (*diephtheironto* [3.98.1, lines 18f. of the OCT). It would be easy to complete this episode with a rounding- off formula and move on to the operations at Naupactus (3.98.5). Instead, Thucydides expands the story of the defeat, recounting in detail the flight of the Athenians. Once again we see the Aetolian javelins in action (*esakontizontes*, line 21, cf. *esēkontizon* in line 8) and again hear of the "perishing" (*diephtheiron* in line 22). The theme of losing one's way is also repeated (*tēn hodōn hamartanontas*, line 23); this time they end up in a wood "which had no ways out, and which was soon fired and burnt round them by the enemy" (lines 24f.). At this point Thucydides steps back and generalizes "every form of flight and destruction afflicted the army of the Athenians" (3.98.3), adding the casualty figures and then an emphatic superlative, "these were the best men (*beltistoi dē andres*) in this war from the city of the Athenians to have perished (*diephtharēsan*)" 3.98.4, line 31).

A similar structure can be seen in the account of the slaughter at Mycalessus in 7.29f.: the horror builds in two long sentences (7.29.3), the first with a series of genitive absolutes, the second with polysyndeton. The reader sees what happened at dawn the day the Thracians attack the unsuspecting town:

> ... bursting into Mycalessus [the Thracians] sacked the houses and temples, and murdered (*ephoneuon*) the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women, and even beasts of burden, and whatever else they saw with life in it... .

Surely that was enough horror, and enough space for the story of a single day in a small town of no strategic significance. And, indeed, Thucydides seems to pause, as if about to generalize and then move on to a new episode: "The Thracian race, as is often

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the case with barbarians, is most bloodthirsty when its confidence is high" (7.29.4). But then the horror resumes and intensifies:

> And then no small (*ouk oligē*) confusion reigned and every form of destruction; and they fell upon (*epipesontes*) a boys' school, the largest that there was in the place, into which the children had just gone, and cut them all to pieces (*katekopsa*).

Then come the real markers of the extremity of the event:

> The disaster falling upon the whole town was unsurpassed in magnitude (*oudemias hēssōn*), unapproached by any (*mallon heteras*) in suddenness and horror. (7.29.5)

The grammatical structure continues the polysyndeton of 7.29.4, adding litotes and a ring marked by *epipesontes* in line 17 and *epepeson* in line 20 (cf. lines 4–5). The power of the passage comes largely, I am convinced, from the resumption of vivid detail and the pace of the narrative: the story comes at us fast, ferociously, repeatedly, as the attack did to the people who lived— and died—i n Mycalessus.

But the story is still not over. Theban allies of Mycalessus moved swiftly against the booty- laden Thracians, chase them (the tense switches to the historic present in *katadiōkousin* (7.30.1, line 23) and kill many of them. When the casualties on both sides are recounted, Thucydides again sums up the disaster, echoing 7.29.5, "... a calamity, for its extent, as lamentable as any that happened in the war" (7.30.3). The sentence combines a litotes (literally, "less than none") with two complex, expanded separations of words that logically or grammatically belong together, *huperbata*. The sentence cannot adequately be rendered in English, but encapsulates the disproportionate scale of the *pathos* that Mycalessus experienced.

The Mycalessus episode raises a double question: why such emphasis on a strategically minor operation, and why the reprise and all the features of elaborate style? Since the use of reprise as well as some of the vocabulary and stylistic traits of this passage recur in the account of the Sicilian disaster, a fresh look at that story may help answer these questions.

The Withdrawal from Syracuse (7.73–8 7)

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After the Athenians' defeat at Syracuse they are forced to withdraw by land in increasingly desperate condition. The description is one of the fullest in Thucydides, bringing together many of the techniques of expansion that we have already discussed, but which can now be seen to reinforce one another and act synergistically. Much of the story is presented in day- by- day narrative ("... they now decided to stay also the following day (7.74.1) ... the removal of the army took place upon the second day after the sea-fi ght" (7.75.1). With greater chronological detail comes added sensory detail: sight, of course,

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but also sound. As the Athenian troops find they must leave behind their disabled comrades, we hear the cries and laments:

> These fell to entreating and bewailing until their friends knew not what to do, begging them to take them and loudly calling to each individual comrade or relative, whom they could see, hanging upon the necks of their tent-f ellows ... calling again and again upon heaven and shrieking as they were left behind. (7.75.4)

Such sensory vividness confronts the reader with the suffering already experienced (*peponthotas*) and the prospect of even worse still to come (*pathōsin*, 7.75.4). Thucydides even breaks from his usual aversion to similes and likens the sufferings of the army to that of a besieged city (7.75.5). Soon Nicias is shouting (*boēi*, 7.76.1) words of encouragement to the dispirited army; his words are reported in direct discourse (7. 77).

After that the sound goes dead. Vision, however, reaches a new intensity as the Athenian troops, exhausted and dehydrated, pushed on to the river Assinarus:

> Forced to huddle together, they fell against and trod down one another, some dying immediately (*euthus diephtheironto*) upon the javelins, others getting entangled together and stumbling over the articles of baggage, without being able to rise again. Meanwhile the opposite bank, which was steep, was lined by the Syracusans, who showered missiles down upon the Athenians, most of them drinking greedily and heaped together in disorder in the hollow bed of the river. The Peloponnesians also came down and butchered them, especially those in the water, which was thus immediately spoiled (*euthus diephtharto*), but which they went on drinking just the same, mud and all, bloody as it was, most even fighting to have it. (7.84.3– 5)

The passage works to a large extent by having the reader's eyes follow the weapons hurled down at the frantic Athenians in the river bed; then we see on one bank the Syracusans shooting their missiles from above (*aōthen*); then the focus returns to the river bed and the chaos among the Athenians. Then from the other bank the Peloponnesian troops made their descent (*epikatabantes*). The focus shifts from the slitting of throats (*esphazon*) to the water, spoiled as it was, and then to the mud, turning red with blood, to the Athenian troops fighting one another for it, then to their bodies piled up, like the dead from the plague (7.85.1, cf. 2.52.2). Rarely is such vivid and appalling detail found in a historical account.

Up to this point the narrative of the episode has all been in past tenses, but when the situation is clearly hopeless—e ven to Nicias— the tense shifts, just for a second, to the more vivid historical present, as Nicias hands himself over (*paradidōsi* 7.85.1) to the Spartan commander, Gylippus.

In Thucydides' work the culmination of a narrative is often marked by a superlative, and in 7.85.4 that pattern seems to sum up the disaster— "...this was the greatest slaughter..." (*pleistos gar dē phonos houtos*, line 26f.). The superlative is expanded and made more emphatic by being surrounded by litotes (*ouk oligon* in line 26, and *oudenos elaassōn* in line 27.

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It's all over. The story could now be drawn to a swift completion, perhaps with a casualty count or a few words on the execution of Nicias and his colleague, Demosthenes. Instead there is a reprise— one more, even more appalling episode, the fate of those who were captured and imprisoned in the quarries of Syracuse:

> Crowded in a narrow hole, without any roof to cover them, the heat of the sun and the stifling closeness of the air tormented them during the day, and then the nights which came on autumnal and chilly, made them ill by the violence of the change; besides, as they had to do everything in the same place for want of room, and the bodies of those who died of their wounds or from the variations in the temperature, or from similar causes, were left heaped together one upon another, intolerable stench arose; while hunger and thirst never ceased to afflict them, each man during eight months having only half a pint of water and a pint of corn given him daily. In short, no single suffering (*kakopathēsai*, cf. 86.2, line 10) to be apprehended by men thrust into such a place was spared them. (7.87.1–2)

The details are conveyed in polysyndeton; there are fifteen coordinating connectives (*te* and *kai*) in these lines. Again there is no hint of sound, but the visual detail is vivid; nor does the narrative spare us the stench of rotting bodies. As the unit draws to a close we once again encounter a Thucydidean superlative, full of irony, "this was the greatest (*megiston*) Hellenic achievement (*ergon*) of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history" (7.87.5, line 16 of the OCT). This superlative is followed by two more, in assonance: "...most glorious (*lamprotaton*) to the victors, and most calamitous (*dustuchestaton*) to the conquered (line 18 f.). These are surrounded by the repeated litotes *ouden hoti ouk* in lines 10 and 21.

Thucydides has used almost all his expansionary techniques in his account of Athens' Sicilian disaster. It is rare to find such fullness, such *enargeia*, such compelling development of a central theme, *pathos*, the Athenians' suffering, and in a wider sense the power of war to turn active into passive, and take away any illusion of control.

Without this "reprise" the Sicilian narrative would still create in its reader, I believe, an emotional mimesis of the sufferings the Athenians endured. But the reprise brings some of the themes of the preceding chapter, the thirst of the Athenians, for example (7.84.2 and 7.87.2), to a new level of intensity.

Conclusion: A Mimetic Principle at Work?

………

> Still, it is extremely foolish to argue about the length or brevity of writings, for what we should value, I suppose, is not their extreme brevity or prolixity, but what they do best (*ta beltista*). (Plato, *Laws* IV 722a f., translated by R. G. Bury, modified)

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A few years ago the agent of an artist friend of mine urged her to start painting on larger canvases. When she did so, the effect was stunning. The increase in scale let light assert itself, drew the viewer into the painting, brought the landscapes more fully to life. The change was qualitative, not quantitative.

"Scale matters," we say, and in Thucydides too it makes possible qualitative change, not just more, more intense. It's a form of risk taking, *kindynos*. Longinus noted that when he commented on Thucydidean risk taking. He saw Thucydides as

> ... making the audience terrified for the total collapse of the sentence and compelling them from sheer excitement to share the speaker's risk: then unexpectedly after a great interval, the long- lost phrase turns up, pat at the end so that he astounds them all the more by the sheer reckless audacity of his *hyperbaseis*. (22.4, translated by Fyfe, modified)

Behind such writing stands a mimetic principle. The text imitates the emotional effects of its subject matter. The scale is mimetic as well; what is great in the subject matter demands greatness of scale. That's true, of course, for the major battles, especially those that are turning points in the war. But there are other types of greatness in the war and these deserve treatment in proportion to their significance.

So, it follows that we must ask: what was Thucydides' understanding of greatness? One important line of inquiry is provided by the way he uses the adjective *megas* (meaning big or great, especially vertically). Its superlative *megistos* is particularly revealing. That is evident from the outset when Thucydides refers to his expectation that this war would be a great one, indeed the greatest *kinēsis*, disturbance (1.1.1– 2).

The theme of greatness is restated in 1.23, clarifying what Thucydides meant in those earlier sentences. Now it is explicit:

> The Peloponnesian war was prolonged in length (*mēkos*) and scale (*mega*), and sufferings (*pathēmata*) came about in it for Greece, without parallel in a comparable amount of time. Never had so many cities been taken and laid desolate, here by the barbarians, here by the parties contending (the old inhabitants sometimes being removed when their cities were captured); never was there so much banishment and blood- shedding, now on the field of battle, now through *stasis*. Old stories of occurrences handed down by tradition, but scarcely confirmed by experience, suddenly ceased to be incredible; there were earthquakes of unparalleled extent and violence; eclipses of the sun occurred with a frequency unrecorded in in previous times; there were great droughts in sundry places and consequent famines, and that most calamitous and destructive visitation, the sickness of plague. (1.23.1– 3)

This passage starts with, then moves beyond conventional measures of greatness— length and size of military operations— and ends with a catalogue of *pathēmata*, not just "sufferings," but things that happen over which humans have no control. This understanding of greatness, combined with the mimetic principle that the scale of

treatment should be proportionate to the significance of the episode, explains why certain
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episodes are accorded extensive treatment even though they are not of great strategic significance. The measure of greatness is *pathos*, not military might. Expansion of scale makes it possible to bring the reader face to face with and see with vividness the moments where *pathos* appears in all its aspects— suffering of those swept into the war, their loss of control, and the emotion of the sympathetic reader. *Pathos* is Thucydides' distinctive and ultimate measure of its greatness.

Pathos seems to intensify as the war goes on. It's powerful enough in the account of the plague in the second book, no less so in that of the Corcyrean *stasis* in Book 3. It is implicit in the story of Mytilene and of its counterpart Melos, and culminates in Book 7 with the account of Mycalessus and of the Sicilian disaster. And while we can only extrapolate, would it not be the story of Athens itself— defeat, suffering, the loss of autonomy and control, if Thucydides' story of the war been completed?

Such a way of writing is Thucydides' genre changer, the feature that most sharply distinguishes his work from his predecessors'. To be sure, it is not inconsistent with Greek rhetorical theory, as we understand it from later writers. Thucydides' goal, however, is not praise or blame, acquittal or conviction, adoption of one policy rather than another. By controlling scale and all that goes along with such control he has, I believe, moved his narrative, and his readers, beyond rhetoric, from *peithō* to *pathos*...

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