

II. — The Melian Dialogue

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The Melian Dialogue is a link between Euripides and Plato. Its unique form and planned place in the center of Thucydides' completed history emphasizes the tragic antinomy of the Greek situation: the insoluble conflict of the two complementary political institutions and philosophies of the small autonomous city state and the Athenian Empire. Written after 404 B.C., the Melian Dialogue is an essential part of Thucydides' main theme: to trace the ideals and realities of Athenian policy as reflected in the *ἔργα* and the *λόγοι* of the Peloponnesian War. The Dialogue, while recognizing the right of the Melians to be what they are, was never intended to be an indictment of the Athenian attitude, which is presented as closely related to the Periclean speeches and as a development of, rather than a deviation from the political thought of Thucydides' ideal statesman.

Thucydides is the historian of an age when "man as the measure of all things" discovered the inherent and insoluble antinomies of *νόμος* and *φύσις*, of ideal justice and successful expediency in the political as in every other field of life. His experiences and observations made the question of right and might in the relationship between equals and unequals in power one of his favorite topics in his history of the Peloponnesian War. This issue appealed to him both as a political thinker and as the writer of the great tragedy of Athens' "grandeur and decadence." Both aspects are combined to make the Melian Dialogue a masterpiece within a masterpiece, a work much praised and discussed, but also much misunderstood.¹

¹ There is hardly any book or article on Thucydides which does not mention the Melian Dialogue. For detailed discussion cf. G. Méautis, "Le Dialogue des Athéniens et des Méliens," *REG* 48 (1935) 250-279; V. Bartoletti, "Il Dialogo degli Ateniesi e dei Melii nella Storia di Tuciddide," *RFIC* n.s. 17 (1939) 301-318; G. Deininger, *Der Melierdialog*, diss. Erlangen, 1939 (see rev. by G. F. Bender, *PhW* 60 [1940] 129-136). Further: R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog*, 1 (Leipzig, 1895) 45-49; T. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, 2 (New York, 1905) 25 f.; W. Nestle, "Thukydides und die Sophistik," *NJA* 33 (1914) 649-682, esp. 669-672 (cf. *Griech. Geistesgeschichte* [Stuttgart, 1944] 248-250); W. R. M. Lamb, *Clio Enthroned* (Cambridge, 1914) 190-206; E. Schwartz, *Das Geschichtswerk des Thukydides* (Bonn, 1919) 137-144; M. Pohlenz, "Thukydidesstudien," *NGG* (1919) 132-135; F. Taeger, *Thukydides* (Stuttgart, 1925) 225-239; C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (London, 1929) 113 f.; G. de Sanctis, "Postille Tuciddidee 1: Il Dialogo tra i Melii e gli Ateniesi," *Rend. Acc. Lincei*, s. 6, Vol. 6 (1930) 299-308; W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, 1 (Oxford, 1933) 396-399; O. Regenbogen, "Thukydides als politischer Denker," *HG* 44 (1933) 2-25; A. Deffner, *Die Rede bei Herodot und ihre Weiterbildung bei Thukydides*, diss. München, 1933; E. Dietzfelbinger, *Thukydides als politischer Denker*, diss. Erlangen, 1937; G. F. Bender, *Der Begriff des Staatsmanns bei*

The Melian Dialogue is unique in its form. It is the only case in which Thucydides has discarded his device of using speeches to present political conditions and forces. The time of its composition² makes the Melian Dialogue a link between the philosophic discussions in Euripides and Plato's Socratic dialogues. Socrates, Euripides, and Thucydides are contemporaries, and though different in temper, outlook; and interest, share the same background of the "sophistic" age.³ Its predilection for controversial subjects and for the revaluation of traditions and concepts led from the everyday form of oral discussion to the literary and philosophical device of the dialogue.⁴

Like a scene in a tragedy, the Melian Dialogue belongs to the Thucydidean passages which, as Plutarch says (*Mor.* 347A), turn the reader into a spectator. It makes him witness history in action. Rationalistic scepticism and keen analysis have not impaired Thucydides' dramatic abilities.⁵ Usually restrained by his aversion to emotional verbosity, they are the more impressive in the few cases in which they come forth, as in the Melian Dialogue, which presents the tragedy of the particular case without losing sight of the general issue: the dynamism of power and the development of Athenian political thought and action under the impact of the war.

The speakers, or we might say, actors, are not characterized as individuals. Thucydides excludes, as everywhere, whatever has no immediate bearing upon the political issue. The speakers represent, however, not only the philosophy and the interests but also the character and temper of their people. The Athenians express the spirit of their city at the height of her power, after the successful repulse of all attacks against her empire, and on the eve of her most

Thucydides, diss. Erlangen, 1937; J. H. Finley Jr., "Euripides und Thucydides," *HSPh* 49 (1938) 23-68; *Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942) 202-212. See also my previous articles on Thucydides, *V&G* 20 (1930) 1-12, and *NJW* 7 (1931) 248-258.

² Cf. Schwartz, *op. cit.* 38 f.; Pohlenz, *op. cit.* 135; De Sanctis, *op. cit.* 306; Méautis, *op. cit.* 261. For an early date, without convincing arguments: K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte*, 2.2 (Strassburg, 1916) 14; A. Momigliano, "La composizione della Storia di Tuciddide," *Mem. Acc. Scienze Torino*, s. 3, vol. 67 (1930) 11.

³ Cf. Hirzel, *op. cit.* 48; Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 10; Finley, *HSPh* 49.23 ff.

⁴ Cf. Hirzel, *op. cit.* 49; Nestle, *op. cit.* 670; Jaeger, *op. cit.* 398; Finley, *Thucydides*, 208.

⁵ Cf. T. Hobbes, introd. to Thucydides translation (*English Works*, 8) 22; Schwartz, *op. cit.* 25; Finley, *Thucydides*, 209; R. Jebb, *Essays and Addresses* (Cambridge, 1907) 437; A. Cosattini, *Tucidide* (Milano, 1929) 46 f.

daring enterprise — a spirit, dynamic and aggressive, which allows rest neither to themselves nor to others (cf. 1.70.9). The Melians, on the other hand, make up for their lack of power with aristocratic pride, Doric steadfastness, and a stubborn stand for the old Greek ideal of the independent, even though small, city state.

Thucydides expects his readers to ask why he introduces a dialogue instead of a pair of speeches. This is the reason for his presenting it as a suggestion from the Athenians. Although there can be no doubt that the dialogue as we read it is Thucydides' invention, it gets a touch of psychological probability as a natural reflection of both the particular situation and the Athenian character, with its joy in seeing in every phenomenon and condition an *ἀγών* between opposite forces and ideas.

The irony of the situation lies in the fact that what apparently is a free discussion, in reality is a thinly disguised ultimatum, as the Melians point out from the very beginning (5.86).⁶ This ultimative character is illustrated by the condition imposed by the Athenians, and, under pressure, accepted by the Melians, that the discussion must be limited to the practical issues of expediency without any interference from the *ὀνόματα καλά* of right and wrong.

As the Athenians see it, relations between unequals are governed by the *ξυμφέρον*, not by the *δίκαιον*.⁷ In the field of the *δίκαιον* the lack of power does not count, and the claims of the Melians to continued neutrality and independence would be unassailable. This is the reason why they try to have the discussion turned to the consideration of the moral imponderables (5.96; 100). For the same reason the insistence on the *ξυμφέρον* makes it easy for the Athenians to shatter the Melian arguments one by one. Expediency indeed would advise the small island not to take up a fight against overwhelming odds, and to accept the *anschluss* as the lesser evil (5.100), since they cannot have *ἐλευθερία* and *σωτηρία* at the same time.⁸

Why, then, does Thucydides have his Athenians suggest a discussion at all? The very fact that it has no external results and cannot have any, makes the general issue behind the particular

⁶ Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 304.

⁷ On *ξυμφέρον* and *δίκαιον* in Thucydides and Euripides, cf. Finley, *HSPh* 49.32 f., 47 f.; and 50 (1939) 51 f.

⁸ *Σωτηρία* as seen from the Athenian and from the Melian point of view, cf. H. Patzer, *Das Problem der Geschichtsschreibung des Thukydides und die Thukydideische Frage* (Berlin, 1937) 60.

case stand out the more clearly. It is the inevitable clash not only of diverging interests, but of opposite political philosophies and ways of life.

The independence of Melos represents the last survival of polis autonomy in the Aegean, the core of the Attic empire, and her conquest by Athens in a way symbolizes the zenith and the turning point of Athenian ascendancy. It is a typical aspect of Athenian character that even at this moment of strength and, as the later treatment of the reluctant island shows, supreme ruthlessness, the Athenians try not only to conquer, but to convince. In common with many conquerors they want their subjects not only to accept their rule, but also their philosophy.

With the missionary dogmatism of the adherents of a new philosophy, they are sure of their own position and convinced that their arguments as well as their military forces are superior to those of their opponents.

One of the main purposes of the Melian Dialogue is to make clear that both sides have a point. Its dramatic power is increased by the presentation of two opposite though complementary political ideals and attitudes. The reader and "spectator" may identify himself with either side and ask himself what he would say or do in the same situation. Or, better still, he may recognize that the position taken by both sides is equally natural and justified and that both have to be seen together as expressing different aspects of the same issue. But, as in Attic tragedy and in Plato's *Apology* or *Gorgias*, whatever words are spoken by either party appear tragically futile when read with the knowledge of the inexorable and bitter end. If Thucydides had had his Athenians refute their opponents by a speech in his usual way, we would not have had the dramatic intensity of a prizefight in which the Melians, though outmatched on the battleground of expediency, rise again and again with new objections against the striking force of the apparently irrefutable Athenian arguments. There is much in Thucydides which agrees with the Athenian concept of enlightened imperialism and practical expediency. But his own aristocratic background helps him to recognize in the Melians the power of their tradition and character if not of their arguments. Against the scepticism of his contemporaries they offer an impressive example that men fight and die not only for their interests, but for their beliefs, ideals, hopes, and even illusions.

The Melian Dialogue presents the usual Thucydidean concentration of speech and thought. This concentration contrasts with the Herodotean and the earlier Platonic dialogues, in both of which even discussions of a deep philosophic meaning stay closer to the easy colloquialism of everyday language.⁹ The Melian Dialogue brings the essence of the political situation strikingly before our eyes, but as in most Thucydidean speeches, it leaves out the colorful inconsequentialities of an actual talk and discussion. Thucydides is little concerned with the emotional and moral aspects of an event whose inhumanity formed the background for Euripides' *Troades*.¹⁰ The very excitement and indignation which the Melian case seems to have stirred up among contemporaries, was one more reason for the historian to present it as an example of the actualities and the philosophy of power in wartime, as a subject not for moral emotions, but for clear and unbiased judgment.

Both the old Greek tradition of the independent small polis and the "modern" imperialism of Athens are an essential part of the political scene. The Melians, conservative and contained, want only to be left alone to live as they have lived for centuries. But the Athenians, for reasons both of prestige and of political philosophy, cannot tolerate an independent island in the middle of their embattled empire. In some regards the speeches dealing with the fate of Mytilene and Plataea (2.71–74, 3.9–14, 37–48, 54–67) offer parallels to the precarious situation of the small country as a pawn or a battleground in the struggle of the greater powers.

The parallels to the Melian Dialogue in the discussion between Archidamus and the Plataeans (2.71–74) are particularly worth noting.¹¹ Much in this discussion reminds one of Herodotus both in form and in concepts. In this case Thucydides presents a small country in conflict with the interests of a conservative power under a conservative leader. Persuasion combined with pressure is brought against Plataea to change from an Athenian ally into a neutral (72.1); against Melos to change from a neutral into an

⁹ Relationship between Herodotean and Thucydidean speeches, cf. Deffner, *op. cit.*; F. Jacoby, *RE* Suppl. 2, s.v. "Herodotos," 494; A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 1 (Oxford, 1945) 144 ff.; *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford, 1937) 184 f.

¹⁰ Cf. L. Parmentier, introd. to the Budé edition of the *Troades* (1925) 16; Finley, *HSPH* 49.55; G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London, 1941) 280.

¹¹ W. Aly, *Formprobleme der griechischen Prosa*, (*Philologus*, Suppl. 21, Heft 3 [1929]) 96 f.; cf. Finley, *Thucydides*, 211.

Athenian ally. While the Melians are to pay tribute, like the rest of the Athenian subjects (5.111.4), the Plataeans are offered rent for their land and indemnity for the planned temporary occupation by Sparta. Archidamus is a perfect foil to the Athenians of the Melian Dialogue. He does not show the Athenian zest for discussion. Thucydides makes him dwell on the same concepts which the Athenians of the Dialogue reject; but all the fine words about *δίκη* and the solemn invocation of the gods do not protect Plataea from paying the same price for her loyalty to Athens as do the Melians for their loyalty to their freedom. Thucydides wants his readers to look at the tragic chapters (3.68 and 5.116) at the same time, and when they remember the Athenian treatment of Melos, not to forget how Sparta, the conqueror, and the idol in the eyes of many Greeks, and even of some Athenians, of 404 B.C., behaved in a similar case.

The λόγος of the Plataean *ἔργον* is divided into two parts; the discussion with Archidamus at the beginning of the tragedy of Plataea, and the speeches in the fight against the charges of the Thebans at the end. In the case of Melos Thucydides concentrates the beginning and end, and the foreground and background, into the one great tragic scene of the Dialogue.

In practical life, the main purpose of a discussion is to lead to a compromise. The Melian Dialogue, like its predecessors, the Euripidean dialogues, and its successors, Plato's Socratic dialogues, rather stresses the irreconcilability of opposing characters and philosophies.¹² Thucydides makes both parties emphasize their preference for a peaceful solution: the Athenians because as intelligent imperialists they want to rule over an intact city rather than to conquer and destroy (5.93), the Melians because they have few illusions about their fate if no compromise can be achieved. However, the tragic issue is that neither can the Athenians sacrifice their prestige nor the Melians their freedom without ceasing to be what they are.

The Melian Dialogue as a test case for the conflict between the *δίκαιον* and the *ξυμφέρον* in foreign affairs leaves no doubt that the principle of the *δίκαιον* obtains only *ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης* (5.89),¹³

¹² Cf. Nestle, *op. cit.* 670; Jaeger, *op. cit.* 398; Méautis, *op. cit.* 263; Deininger, *op. cit.* 137; Patzer, *op. cit.* (above, note 8) 60.

¹³ Cf. W. Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeit des Thukydides* (Göttingen, 1842) 269; Nestle, *op. cit.* 673; Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 19; Deininger, *op. cit.* 99; A. Menzel, *Kallikles* (Vienna, 1922) 55.

which does not exclude moderation in dealing with weaker countries. This is in line with the enlightened imperialism of Pericles, as is the statement of the Athenians about the three basic relations in foreign politics: to equals, to superiors, and to inferiors in power (5.111). The stern treatment of Melos after resistance and conquest (5.116) should not lead to the frequent misconception of the Athenian suggestions in the Dialogue as a paradigm of ruthlessness. The Thucydidean Pericles who, in speeches written to extol his statesmanship and policy, defends the necessities of the empire as overriding the claims of the "allies" (2.63.2, 1.76 f.), would not disapprove of the reasons given by the Athenians for demanding the *anschluss* of the strategically located island. Theirs is the voice of the inexorable logic of power, the *φύσις ἀναγκαία* of the rule of the strong, which they could not change even if they wanted to. *Δέος*, *τιμή*, and *ὠφέλεια*, the twice repeated (1.75.3, 76.2) key words in defence of the Periclean empire, form also the background of the Athenian attitude in the Dialogue.

The Melian Dialogue does not show any outspoken preference.¹⁴ As usual, Thucydides presents the *ἔργα* and the *λόγοι* and leaves the evaluation and the conclusion to the reader. He does not offer any dogmatic system of political philosophy. It is against this scientific and morally neutral attitude that Plato pours out his wrath in the *Gorgias*, which has been called a reply to the thinking which produced the Melian Dialogue.¹⁵ One may regret that Plato did not write a dialogue *Thucydides*, in which Socrates might have discussed the problem of the *δίκαιον* in foreign politics with the historian.

The frank statements in the Dialogue about the realities of power are just what any observer of international relations could see, then and now. The rejection by the Athenians of all *ὀνόματα καλά* and the readiness to expound unpleasant truths once more brings the Melian Dialogue in line with Thucydides' great contemporaries, Euripides and Socrates. It is the natural reflection of an age and a society disillusioned by the physical and moral

¹⁴ Cf. Lamb, *op. cit.* 200; Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 305; Jaeger, *Humanistische Reden und Vorträge* (Berlin, 1937) 102; Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (Stuttgart, 1940) 522.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Pohlenz, *Aus Platons Werdezeit* (Berlin, 1913) 238 ff.; Nestle, *op. cit.* 675; Cochrane, *op. cit.* 112 f.; G. Rohr, *Platons Stellung zur Geschichte* (Berlin, 1932) 113–119 (118: Thucydides would have been among the prohibited books in Plato's state); P. Shorey, *TAPhA* 24 (1893) 75, blames Thucydides for lack of moral judgment.

destruction of war, oscillating between nihilistic cynicism and flight into utopias.

If no more than a clash of interests were involved, a compromise would be possible. But every word spoken by either party underlines the fact that the real issue is the struggle of two political ideals and institutions: the city state limited in area and ambition, less concerned with ruling others than with not being ruled by others (an ideal once shared by the Athenians and bound to re-arise in the utopian Athens of Plato's political philosophy) and the new dynamic force of an expanding and fighting empire. Both are equally genuine creations of the Greek political genius. The Dialogue is written to demonstrate, in the most striking example, the tragic situation of contemporary Greece where empire and independence, instead of complementing each other to form a Hellenic commonwealth, had no choice but to fight and to destroy each other.

The laws of political life, while represented and carried out by man, are impersonal and beyond the categories of good and bad, like the laws of nature, the *φύσις ἀναγκαία*. This basic tenet of Thucydides¹⁶ appears in the point made by the Athenians that the strong rule and the weak obey, which is not presented by the author as an example of bragging ruthlessness.¹⁷ It is rather, as the Athenians most emphatically declare, the natural aspect of relations between countries of unequal power. It is a law recognized by men and gods, valid in the present as it was in the past and will be in the future (5.105). This idea of the *raison d'état* is a natural development of Periclean thought under the stress of 15 years of war. The very fact that the assertions of the Athenians expressly or implicitly recur in speeches made by Pericles or his envoys, is a weighty argument against those¹⁸ who see in the Melian Dialogue an indictment of Athenian policy. Political necessities beyond any

¹⁶ Cf. Nestle, *op. cit.* 672; F. Heinimann, *Nomos und Physis* (Basel, 1945) 167; T. B. L. Webster, *Greek Art and Literature* (Oxford, 1939) 167 f.

¹⁷ Cf. Méautis, *op. cit.* 271; Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 306.

¹⁸ E.g.: E. Meyer, *Forschungen zur Alten Geschichte*, 2 (Halle, 1899) 377; Nestle, *op. cit.* 653; Pohlenz, *NGG* 1919, 132; Dietzfelbinger, *op. cit.* 60 f.; Patzer, *op. cit.* (above, note 8) 12; Finley, *Thucydides*, 89, 103; G. M. A. Grube, *op. cit.* (above, note 10) 280 (cf. *AJPh* 68 [1947] 208); L. Lord, *Thucydides and the World War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1945) 133; De Sanctis, *op. cit.* 306, and *Enciclopedia Italiana*, 34 (1937), s.v. "Tucidide," 464; F. Guglielmino, "La concezione eticopolitica di Tucidide nella redazione definitiva della sua storia," *Arch. Stor. Filos.* 2 (1933) 255 ff. But Nestle (*NJA* 41.225) is equally wrong in calling Thucydides an apostle of power politics.

choice turn the Athenian rule into a *τυραννίς*, as Thucydides makes Pericles say among his last words which are meant to be his political testament (2.63.2; cf. 1.77.5; 3.37.2).¹⁹ A compromise tolerating the continued neutrality of the small island in the middle of the Aegean would be taken as a sign not of moderation, but of weakness (5.95).

It was the precarious condition of the Attic empire that it could not rely on the loyalty of its members, allies in name, subjects in fact.²⁰ Thucydides sees in the necessity to maintain prestige, even through fear and hatred,²¹ the inherent weakness of this political system and one of the main causes of Athens' fall. Also here it is worth noticing that the reference of the Athenians to the hatred of the subjects as *δυνάμειος παράδειγμα* (5.95) only repeats words put in Pericles' mouth in one of the key passages of the entire History (2.64.5; cf. 1.77). The importance Thucydides gives to this vital weakness of Periclean and post-Periclean Athens is shown by the frequent discussion of this topic from the point of view of the Athenians (1.75 ff.; 3.37 ff.; 6.10; 6.82), the allies (3.9 ff.), the enemies (1.122.1), and the neutrals (5.100). The Melian Dialogue itself shows the fruitless attempt to make a free city accept the status of an Athenian subject-ally by persuasion and political pressure.

The Athenians as matter-of-fact followers of *realpolitik* do not harbor any romantic idealization of power or of the strong man. The Melian Dialogue is concerned with relations between states and not between the individual and the community. Therefore the manifest parallels to some aspects of Euripides' Eteocles and Plato's Callicles and Thrasymachus²² ought not to be overstressed. This does not mean that there is no relation between the reckless dynamism in foreign affairs and individual ambition and will to power; Thucydides' own picture of Alcibiades is proof of that. It is natural that those who think only of the handling of Melos after the breakdown of the negotiations feel reminded of the famous analysis of the moral nihilism of this age of wars and civil wars

¹⁹ Cf. F. Wassermann, *NJW* 7 (1931) 251, 256.

²⁰ Cf. Wassermann, *op. cit.* 251 f.; Jaeger, *Paideia*, 1.396; Méautis, *op. cit.* 261 ff.; Dietzfelbinger, *op. cit.* 81 ff.

²¹ Cf. Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 307. A. Zimmern, *Croesus and Solon* (Oxford, 1928) 89, suggests that the real enemy of Athens is not Sparta, but her own subjects.

²² Cf. Finley, *HSPH* 49.58; G. M. A. Grube, *op. cit.* (above, note 10) 359; Jaeger, *Hum. Vorträge*, 102; G. Grote, *Plato* (London, 1888) 2.341, note 1.

(3.82 f.). However, this does not apply to the spirit of the Dialogue itself, whose cool and unemotional reasoning, when seen on the background of this moral breakdown, seems rather moderate²³ and not out of tune with the Periclean concept of Athens' political mission and political necessities.

Thucydides uses the form of the dialogue to make his readers listen to the arguments from both sides. Both his Athenians and his Melians so convincingly advance their points that either side has been taken mistakenly as his mouthpiece, while in reality both parties are intended to be seen together to give the complete picture. Thus the Melian Dialogue is not, as is sometimes asserted,²⁴ a fight between the λόγος δίκαιος and the λόγος ἄδικος. It also would be wrong to see in the Athenian attitude nothing but an example of Thrasymachus' definition of the δίκαιον as τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον. The Athenians rather assume that the law of power, as every natural law, is in the interest of both sides concerned (5.93). Thucydides does not give any hint either that the concepts of ὕβρις and νέμεσις²⁵ should be applied to their attitude in the Dialogue in the light of the catastrophes of 413 and 404. His concern is with εὐβουλία and ἀβουλία²⁶ and he wants his readers to judge both words and actions by this criterion, whether they see the Melian Dialogue as a battleground of the forces and conditions of the Peloponnesian War, or as a general paradigm for any comparable political situation.

His justification of the necessities of power has not impaired his respect for the character of the Melians and his understanding of the precarious situation of a small country either as an actual or a potential ally in the war of the great powers. The Mytilenean and Plataean speeches, Brasidas' speech in Acanthus (4.85–87), and the Camarina speeches (6.76–87), illustrate Thucydides' interest in this question²⁷ from different points of view. A rugged people

²³ The Athenian demands as reasonable, cf. Schwartz, *op. cit.* 140; Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 306. Concerning the contemporary moral breakdown, as reflected in Thucydides and Euripides, see my remarks, *TAPhA* 71 (1940) 599; Finley, *HSPh* 49.55.

²⁴ Cf. Nestle, *NJA* 41 (1918) 228.

²⁵ Cf. G. Grote, *History of Greece* (New York, 1857) 7.118; E. Meyer, *op. cit.* (above, note 18) 377; G. B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of his Age* (London, 1911) 502; G. F. Abbott, *Thucydides* (London, 1925) 126; Taeger, *op. cit.* 225; Regembogen, *op. cit.* 9; H. Gundert, "Athen und Sparta in den Reden des Thukydides," *Die Antike* 16 (1940) 111.

²⁶ Cf. Nestle, *NJA* 33 (1914) 653 f. There is, however, no justification for Méautis' assumption (*op. cit.* 275, 277) that Thucydides sees in the decision of the Melians a tragic γνώμης ἀμάρτημα.

²⁷ Cf. Jaeger, *Paideia*, 1.396.

on a rugged island, the Melians have maintained their independence for seven centuries, not only in relation to Athens, but even to Sparta to which they feel akin by race and political system. Very effectively the historian has them mention the 700 years of independence only once, but among the last words they speak (5.112.1). It is meant to recall the famous expression of Athenian national pride in the Funeral Oration (2.36.2): *τὴν γὰρ χώραν οἱ αὐτοὶ αἰεὶ οἰκοῦντες διαδοχῇ τῶν ἐπιγιγνομένων μέχρι τοῦδε ἐλευθέραν δι' ἀρετὴν παρέδωσαν*.

It is their final argument. Like tragic heroes they have the choice only between evils: whether to sacrifice their physical existence by saying no to the Athenian proposal, or their moral existence by saying yes, and the only decision they can make without betraying their character, is the one which inescapably leads to the fate reported in chapter 116. From the viewpoint of practical expediency, as presented by the Athenians and as the History seems to indicate (5.85.1; cf. 116.3: *προδοσίας τινός*) — a viewpoint also shared by some of the common people in Melos — this is nothing but suicide. As the Athenians do not fail to emphasize, the conditions offered to the Melians are comparatively mild: joining the Attic system in the face-saving position of a minor ally (5.111.4). And, as the Melians tacitly agree, their situation is different from the otherwise similar one of the Plataeans, as inclusion in the then unchallenged Attic empire does not entail any risk, while on the other hand the Dialogue makes clear enough the futility of any hopes for help from the outside.

If Thucydides were nothing but the engrained rationalist he so frequently has been considered, he would not have so strikingly presented his Melians as an example of the power of ideals and imponderables over all the practical counsels of reason and expediency. The old aristocratic and Doric ideas of *αἰδώς* and *δίκη* are the core of their existence. They stand against the Athenians as representatives not only of a different political ideal, but of a different age. The dialogue form contributes much to stress this contrast between the conservative Greece of yore and the new and modern Greece of the Athenians, for whom these two central values of an old tradition are only prejudices, *ὀνόματα καλά*, as so many things which once were great to their own fathers. It is like the Athens of Aeschylus arraigned against the Athens of Euripides, as portrayed by Aristophanes in a different and less unbiased spirit

shortly before the Melian Dialogue was written; and Thucydides naturally expected to find Athenians of both parties among his readers. *Αἰδώς* and *δίκη*, once common to weak and strong, now are outmoded in international relations.²⁸ The change of the *εἰωθὺν ἀξιῶσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων* (cf. 3.82.4), as it appears in the revaluation of the Athenians, sees the real *αἰσχροῦν* in the stubborn insistence of the Melians on risking their very existence for their old-fashioned concept of *αἰδώς* which prevents them from facing the inescapable consequences of weakness and compromising with the factual power (5.111.4 f.). *Αἰδώς*, like *ἀρετή*, has turned from a moral quality into an intellectual condition.

It is wrong to say that the Melians misjudge the facts. To be sure they are mistaken in hoping that Sparta, the alleged champion of Greek freedom and conservative tradition, will be induced by *αἰδώς* to come to their rescue (5.104),²⁹ and the Athenians with a touch of bitter irony have to inform them that, in her relation to others, Sparta has become an eager disciple of the modern Athenian philosophy of expediency (5.109). However, the Melians have no illusions about the real situation, when they say their final no (5.112). The Dialogue emphasizes this point, in order to give an example of a small Greek city fighting for what seemed to be a lost cause, not because of any reasonable hope for success or even survival, but because of an unshakeable loyalty to the categorical imperative of national honor and tradition.

The conflict of the two philosophies and ages is particularly well reflected in their attitude towards *τύχη*. For the Melians it is still bound to the religious and moral order. It is *τύχη ἐκ τοῦ θείου*, a sign of divine grace and justice, of help and protection beyond human planning and expectation. The sceptical and disillusioned mind of the Athenians sees only the blindness of chance. It is this mentality which plays such a significant part in the contemporary Euripidean drama with its interplay between scheming and the whims of fortune. The Periclean and Thucydidean ideal of man-centered *γινῶναι τὰ δέοντα* sets *τέχνη* and *γνώμη* against *τύχη*.³⁰

²⁸ Cf. E. von Erffa, *Aidos* (*Philologus*, suppl. 30, Heft 2 [1937]) 185–192 (Thucydides), 131–172 (Euripides); Taeger, *op. cit.* 233; Méautis 275 ff.; Finley, *Thucydides*, 210.

²⁹ Cf. G. P. Landmann, *Eine Rede des Thukydides* (Kiel, 1932) 42.

³⁰ Cf. Shorey, *op. cit.* (above, note 15) 77; Bender, *op. cit.* 8 ff.; 20, note 54; R. Zahn, *Die erste Periklesrede*, diss. Kiel, 1934, 80 ff.; *γνώμη* against *τύχη*, cf. W. Woessner, *Die synonymische Unterscheidung bei Thukydides und den politischen Rednern der*

This philosophy of self-reliance and planning, of leaving as little as possible to the *παράλογος τῶν πραγμάτων* (cf. 2.60.5; 1.140.1) stands behind the Athenian diatribe against the related concepts of *τύχη* and *ἐλπίς*.³¹ Mention of them by the Melians turns the cool matter-of-factness of the Athenians into irony and even anger, as this means an attack on the foundations of their philosophy, and Thucydides is well aware that men are frequently more intolerant of those who deny their basic beliefs than of those who impair their interests. It is not hard for the Athenians to shatter the arguments of their opponents one by one, and it is done much more impressively through the form of the dialogue than it might have been done by a continuous speech. This is also the reason for the preference for this form in contemporary and future discussion of philosophic problems. It is one of the aspects of the Melian Dialogue which has not been sufficiently noticed, that Thucydides emphasizes the contrast between the comparative weakness of the arguments and hopes of the Melians, and the unshakeable stubbornness of their character and loyalty.

When Thucydides wrote the Melian Dialogue, it had become clear that the Athenians themselves needed the advice to beware of the danger of unfounded hopes. Not so long after the Melian affair Aristophanes' Euelpides appeared on the stage as a caricature, not much exaggerated, of a dangerous aspect of the Athenian character, the praise of which the historian puts into the mouth of their enemies (1.70.3): *παρὰ δύναμιν τολμηταὶ καὶ παρὰ γνώμην κινδυνεύουσι καὶ ἐν τοῖς δεινοῖς εὐέλπιδες*. The most dynamic and most dangerous example of this indulgence in wishful thinking is the Sicilian Expedition with which the Melian Dialogue is so closely connected that it has to be regarded as its prelude. Thucydides wants the reader to feel the tragic irony behind the taunting remarks of the Athenians about the belief in the *τύχη ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ*, if he remembers that not so much later it is the Athenian general, Nicias, who in a desperate situation counts on *τύχη* and hopes for a miracle wrought by the gods (7.61.3; 77.2 f.), and in this case the Athenian leader himself exemplifies what in the Dialogue the Athenians

Griechen, diss. Berlin, 1937, 24. Tyche in Euripides, cf. G. Busch, *Untersuchungen zum Wesen der τύχη in den Tragödien des Euripides*, diss. Heidelberg, 1937; W. Schade-waldt, *Monolog und Selbstgespräch* (Berlin, 1926) 255 ff.; F. Solmsen, *Hermes* 69 (1934) 400; Finley, *HSPH* 49.61.

³¹ Cf. Shorey, *op. cit.* (above, note 15) 70 f.; Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 18; Méautis, *op. cit.* 266 f.

demonstrate with such self-assurance: the futility of hopes based on righteousness without power.³²

Thucydides, who deals in his History with religion only insofar as it is an important political factor, gives considerable space and attention in the Melian Dialogue to this problem of the disproportion between righteousness and power. The hope of the Melians that the help of the gods will upset the material superiority of wanton and unjust attack is part of their deep-rooted belief in divine justice; a concept of the gods which obtained in Aeschylus' Athens and will obtain again in Plato's utopia. The Athenians of the Dialogue, who in this case are the mouthpiece of the author, reveal a new idea concerning the relation of the gods to human affairs as befitting the moral disintegration of the age under the cumulative impact of war and "sophistic" scepticism. There is no denial of the existence of the gods, but they do not interfere with the laws of nature as expressed in the political sphere by the rule of the strong.³³ It is Thucydides' belief that power itself is neither good nor bad, and when used in accordance with the universally recognized rules of the political game, does not upset the natural (that is to say, also the moral) order. Both Euripidean tragedy and Platonic philosophy face the same problem; how to combine the traditional belief in a world order directed by the gods with the strong appeal made by the new scientific approach to the impersonal and apparently inflexible forces in nature and society. It is significant that for Plato's attempt at a moral reconstruction of political life the doubt of the care of the gods for human affairs was to be considered an unforgivable crime. In the light of this development we have to understand the Athenian reaction to the Melian claim for divine help on account of the righteousness of their cause. The spirit of this age is well expressed in the reference to Zeus in the contemporary *Troades* (886 f.) as εἰτ' ἀνάγκη φύσεως εἴτε νοῦς βροτῶν, and any objection against the right of might becomes like

³² Cf. Jebb, *op. cit.* (above, note 5) 403; Schwartz, *op. cit.* 139; Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 22; Landmann, *op. cit.* (above, note 29) 60; O. Luschkat, *Die Feldherrnreden im Geschichtswerk des Thukydides* (*Philologus*, suppl. 34, Heft 2 [1942]) 91; B. Lavagnini, *Saggio sulla Storiografia Greca* (Bari, 1933) 50.

³³ Cf. H. von Arnim, *Gerechtigkeit und Nutzen in der griechischen Aufklärungsphilosophie* (Frankfurter Universitätsreden, 5, 1916) 17; Jebb, *op. cit.* (above, note 5) 411; Taeger, *op. cit.* 234; Wassermann, *op. cit.* 253; Landmann, *op. cit.* (above, note 29) 48; Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 19 ff.; Jaeger, *op. cit.* 398; Méautis, *op. cit.* 269 f.; R. W. Livingstone, introd. to Thucydides translation (London, 1943) 23 f.

an action against the *ἀνθρώπειος λόγος* and thus a revolt against the *νόμος τῆς φύσεως*,³⁴ which, in this philosophy, coincides with the order recognized by the gods.

The dramatic scene acted before our eyes makes Athenians and Melians stand out as opposite types. It is one of Thucydides' main objectives to use the big and small Doric opponents of Athens, the Melians as well as the Spartans, Corinthians, and Syracusans, as a means to put the Athenian character in strong relief. The great theme of the contrast between the Athenian and the Spartan character, one of the main motives of the entire History, plays an important part also in the Melian Dialogue. It illustrates the typical features of each, like the striking comparison made by the Corinthians in that brilliant analysis of national psychology in that chapter (1.70), where Attic energy and restlessness stand beside Spartan caution and lack of decision.

If Thucydides had anticipated the Aristotelian ideal of *μεσότης* he might have said that the Athenians erred in the direction of doing too much, the Spartans of doing too little. Athens interferes wherever she can or wants to, Sparta does not even help where she ought to. Where, as a human complement to the protection by the gods, the Melians expound their hopes for help from Sparta (5.104 ff.), the Athenians have no difficulty in proving that the Melian hopes are futile because they are based on an idealized concept of Spartan character (5.107 ff.). It is the tragedy of the Melians that against Attic power politics they look for rescue to a Sparta which, while lacking Athenian drive and dynamism, shares the modern philosophy that small countries are expendable. In fact, it is one of the main purposes of Thucydides' entire work as well as of the Melian Dialogue to demonstrate that Sparta, while regarded by many Greeks (2.8.4) and even by some Athenians as a liberator, successfully followed the very principles for which Athens was blamed.

Thucydides' own aristocratic background does not fail to call forth his respect for that Spartan type in which the old ideal of *αἰδώς* survives, and the speeches made by Archidamus and Brasidas are written in order to give to his ideal of Athenian leadership a counterpart in these noble representatives of the best in Spartan tradition. It is worth noticing that the only person mentioned by

³⁴ Cf. Arnim, *op. cit.* (above, note 33) 19; the right of might as *νόμος τῆς φύσεως*, cf. Heinemann, *op. cit.* (above, note 16) 167.

name in the Dialogue is Brasidas (5.110.2) in whom, as in Pericles, Thucydides saw a perfect blend of the heritage of the past with modern statesmanship. Brasidas' speech in Acanthus (4.85-87) presents him in a situation which has some similarities with the Melian Dialogue³⁵ in so far as it is also concerned with the winning over of a reluctant small city. There is, however, the great difference that this speech mainly serves to show Brasidas' successful policy and character, and not, like the Melian Dialogue, the tragic antinomy of the general issues of power and justice. Thucydides, who shows the Athens of Cleon and Alcibiades beside the Athens of Pericles, makes it clear that there is another Sparta too, which cares less for the call of honor and tradition than the Melians expect her to do, but worships the new gods of expediency and ruthlessness.³⁶ If Thucydides had lived to complete his work, the contrast between Callicratidas and Lysander would have given him, as it gave to Xenophon, a great opportunity for demonstrating the two opposite poles of the Spartan character, both of which seem combined in Brasidas.

The Melian Dialogue is an integral part of the great cycle of speeches which center around Thucydides' main theme, Athens in her greatness and in her fall, and the sources and aspects of her strength and weakness. Together with the speeches in Sparta, the Periclean trilogy, and the Mytilenean debate,³⁷ the Dialogue contains his judgment about the Athenian character as the central factor in Greek political life. If the historian had wanted to pillory the Athenian attitude and character in the Dialogue, he would not have made them coincide so ostensibly with the other reflections of the Periclean tradition. As an outstanding characteristic of their people and times, his Athenians present the straightforward frankness, which has so frequently caused the Dialogue to be misunderstood as an example of ruthless brutality. They prefer calling the hard and unpleasant facts of the political struggle by their real names. They take pleasure in dispensing with the use of the *ὀνόματα*

³⁵ Cf. Deffner, *op. cit.* 105.

³⁶ Cf. the Euripidean picture of Sparta: Méautis, *op. cit.* 278; Finley, *HSPH* 49.39.

³⁷ The relation of the Melian Dialogue to the Funeral Oration: Schwartz, *op. cit.* 147; Deffner, *op. cit.* 101 (as a contrast to it: Finley, *Thucydides*, 89, 103); to Pericles' Last Speech: Deffner, *op. cit.* 102; to the Mytilenaeon Debate: J. B. Bury, *Ancient Greek Historians* (New York, 1905) 139; Méautis, *op. cit.* 272; Meyer, *op. cit.* (above, note 18) 377; Woessner, *op. cit.* (above, note 30) 16. The Melian Dialogue and Periclean imperialism, cf. J. Hatzfeld, *Alcibiade* (Paris, 1940) 125.

καλά as a camouflage for true motives. They are not ashamed of recognizing and making use of the rules and necessities of power. They turn into a political philosophy the fact of experience that in relations between countries right is a function of might. They are convinced,³⁸ and so is Thucydides, of the soundness of the principle, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*. The inequality of power and right does not exclude a community of self-interest³⁹ between enlightened and moderate rule and subjects who acquiesce in the fact that there can be no political equality for unequals in power (5.91.2).

The Athenians of the Dialogue represent, like their author, the different facets of contemporary mentality. They share the scepticism which we meet in so many characters of contemporary tragedy and which became the starting point for the reinstatement of a system of values in Socratic and Platonic philosophy. This spirit of sceptical enlightenment explains the attack by the Athenians on the belief in oracles (5.103.2), which, it should be noted, is not called forth by any previous mention on the part of the Melians. It is part of the Athenian, and Thucydidean, aversion to introducing the irrational and emotional forces of religion into the matter-of-fact sphere of political decision. That the issue of oracles was a main topic of contemporary thought and discussion,⁴⁰ we see from the vital part they play in Attic tragedy and in Herodotus; and Thucydides himself treats them as phenomena of mass hysteria (cf. 2.17, 54).

The Athenians are sure of their philosophy. In the manner of an Attic tragedy this assurance is stressed at the very moment of the great turn to the downgrade of final catastrophe. Like some Euripidean and Platonic characters, the Athenians of the Dialogue combine two features of the "sophistic" age: the philosophy of power, and the joy in defeating the opponent by superior arguments; not in vain did one of the works of Protagoras bear the title *Καταβάλλοντες*. It is significant that Thucydides has his Athenians speak much more than his Melians (145 lines as against 88 in the Greek text of the Loeb edition). This is in line with their native joy in discussion, which, as Thucydides shows, could be considered either an asset (2.40.2) or a liability (3.38.6). Although the sug-

³⁸ Cf. Gomperz, *op. cit.* 2.26.

³⁹ A topic of contemporary thought, cf. Finley, *HSPH* 50 (1939) 30.

⁴⁰ Cf. Nestle, *op. cit.* 659; Thucydides and oracles, cf. M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der Griech. Religion*, 1 (*Handb. d. Altertumsw.*, Abt. 5, 2. Teil) (München, 1941) 728.

gestion of a dialogue was theirs, sometimes they rather fall into delivering a speech (esp. 5.103; 105; 111). They seem to forget that they have come as conquerors with an ultimatum, and talk like zealous missionaries for a new philosophic creed. They try hard to convince the Melians not only of the hopelessness of physical resistance, but even more, in lines intentionally overdrawn through the emphatic frankness of the dramatic presentation, of the superiority of the modern political philosophy of power for the strong and expediency for the weak. It is a masterpiece of Thucydides' presentation of the dynamic and dangerous energy of his people in the field of the λόγοι and of the ἔργα, that the zeal to convince which they reveal in the Dialogue turns into ruthless suppression of actual resistance.

It is particularly important to keep in mind that the Melian Dialogue was written by an author and for a public who could read it as a prelude to the Sicilian Expedition and, indirectly, to the final catastrophe.⁴¹ Both Athenians and Melians plead their cause before the audience of 404 B.C., when the final defeat induced people to think about the right and wrong decisions and actions taken during the various phases of the war. As always in such a situation, the prophets *ex eventu* loudly raised their voices. Some now condemned the entire Periclean philosophy which turned Athens from a polis into an empire and was prepared to share both the glories and the political and moral risks of panhellenic leadership.⁴² The Melian Dialogue, together with many other passages revealing Thucydides' deepest thoughts about power, was written as an answer to this attitude.

The Dialogue is meant to show the spirit of Athens at the apparent zenith of her power, at the critical turning point from victory to defeat, when the restless dynamism, which so well appears in the Dialogue, made her embark upon her most daring enterprise, which was to become the test of her strength and of her weakness. We know from Xenophon (*Hell.* 2.2.3) that in the hour of the final breakdown they remembered the Melian affair, and there is no doubt that Thucydides intended to make reference to the Dialogue

⁴¹ Cf. Jebb, *op. cit.* (above, note 5) 436; Schwartz, *op. cit.* 138; De Sanctis, *op. cit.* 308; Bartoletti, *op. cit.* 315 f.; Finley, *Thucydides*, 212, 323.

⁴² Cf. P. Cloché, "La Politique Athénienne au Début du Quatrième Siècle," *REA* 43 (1941) 31.

in his discussion of the bitter end. It has been noticed⁴³ that if the work had been completed, the Melian Dialogue would have been in the center. This very position at the focal point, the link between the two parts of the war, gives an additional explanation for the unique form and further proof that the Dialogue was not meant to present a condemnation of Athenian imperialism. At this place where the reader might stop, as on a vantage point *nel mezzo del cammin* to look back to the Athens of 431 led by Pericles, and ahead to the Athens of 404 conquered by Lysander, Thucydides wanted to give a striking and concentrated picture of the forces and ideas which stood behind the greatness and the fall of the Athenian character and empire.

⁴³ Cf. Regenbogen, *op. cit.* 9; Deininger, *op. cit.* 80; Gundert, *op. cit.* (above, note 25) 111.