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Diegesis and Mimesis

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# **Drama and Historiography: the Interaction between Diegesis and Mimesis in Herodotus and Thucydides.**

Abstract

This essay explores the presence and dynamic combination of the diegetic and mimetic modes in the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides as typical examples of fifth-century BC Greek historiography. Relying on significant examples, it offers a narratological discussion of diegesis (heterodiegesis, omniscience, and dramatized narration) showing similarities and differences between the two authors. It also investigates the main functions of mimesis, or direct speech, in their narratives, and illustrates its aims and causes, how it contributes to the psychological characterization and the dramatization of the events, as well as their explanation and interpretation. The widespread presence of dialogues in both Herodotus and Thucydides raises a number of intriguing theoretical questions regarding the relation of their prose with the epic model and the composition and oral fruition of historiographical works in the fifth century. Special attention is devoted to specific passages which, while being almost devoid of narrative pieces (Xerxes' Council in Herodotus 7.8-19 and the Melian dialogue in Thucydides 5.85-113), show a peculiar proclivity for dialogue suggesting a typically dramatic potential.

## **Introduction**

The presence of diegesis and mimesis in classical Greek historiography has received much scholarly attention, with special regard to two great fifth-century BC historiographical models, Herodotus and Thucydides. Several studies have investigated the features, typologies, and functions of these two forms of discourse, but have only occasionally explored their mutual interaction. As a matter of fact, the analysis of their relationship and interchange may give rise to interesting conclusions on how these authors consciously used them. It is worth highlighting from the start the fundamental importance of the technique – of which I will provide significant examples later in the essay – that both Herodotus and Thucydides adopted at crucial turning-points of their historiographical accounts, when the narrative tension is at its peak and the historical events take on an intrin-

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sis paradigmatic and universal value in ethical or political terms. In such moments the chronicle switches to a highly mimetic mode which we may safely define as theatrical. The narrator seems to disappear almost completely letting the characters speak for themselves in ways that are closely remindful of dramaturgical scripts and scenic performance. This is the case, for instance, of the so-called Xerxes' Council in Herodotus' Book 7 (8-19): the narrator shapes a debate between king Xerxes and a few of his generals by minimizing the introductory formulae and having only the characters speak in order to endow the episode with the highest degree of dramatic liveliness. Each orator utters a long *rhexis* (speech) illustrating the reasons for and against the war with Greece. Although Herodotus never comments on, nor judges the events, the interlacing of the speeches and the Council's conclusion suggest a clear condemnation of an assembly system which is only seemingly equivalent to Athenian democracy. The adopted procedure is in fact a totally hypocritical fiction, since the decision of attacking Greece has already been made by Xerxes, while the council can only confirm it.<sup>1</sup>

The same applies to Thucydides. He also tends to intensify the presence of the mimetic dimension in crucial passages of the narration, and the *History of the Peloponnesian War* too includes a glaring example of 'acting', totally unrelated to the diegetic frame. I am referring to the Melian dialogue in Book 5 (5-113), in which the messengers of the two parts discuss the matter at stake following a dialogic pattern of confrontation which is completely unconnected to the formulae that normally introduce or conclude the single interventions. This clearly reveals how the historian adopted a technique altogether remindful of coeval Attic tragedy all the more if one looks at the rapid pace of the dialogue that at times consists in short cues seemingly akin to *stichomythia* in drama. Here too, as we have seen with Herodotus, the choice of enhancing the mimetic dimension is related to the purely symbolic meaning with which, from the author's point of view, the incident of the Melian repression had to be endowed: the cruel and cynical logic of dominion proudly displayed in front of the Melian citizens marks the last successful instance of the Athenian military power which will meet its doom shortly thereafter. Opting for this kind of dramaturgical representation proves especially fit to prefigure and underline the Attic city's 'tragic' destiny and its impending reversal of fortune.<sup>2</sup>

Before focusing my attention on this analysis, though, it is worth clarifying a couple of preliminary issues regarding the relationship between historiographical and epic narration and the connection between mimesis and orality.

<sup>1</sup> See § 4 below.

<sup>2</sup> See § 6 below.

## 1. Historiographical Narration and Epic Narration

When dealing with this kind of investigation, we should first look into the relationship between Herodotus' and Thucydides' historiographical narration and the epic tradition. Aristotelian categorization has always taken its toll on it, and, tracing a sharp division between historiography and poetry, it has unduly obscured the similarities between the two genres. I am referring here to the well-known passage from *Poetics* 9 (1451a36-1452a11); there Aristotle first acknowledges that the differences do not concern formal aspects, since "Herodotus' work could be versified and would be just as much a kind of history in verse as in prose"; hence, he points out that the true difference between the two genres lies in the object of representation, or better, in the relationship between the object and reality. The historian gives "actual events" (τὰ γενόμενα), while the poet presents "the kinds of things that might occur" (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο) "in terms of probability or necessity" (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον). Poetry aims at "the universal" (τὰ καθόλου), while history deals with "particulars" (τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον).<sup>3</sup> According to Aristotle, poetry is never a reproduction of the particular *per se*, but of events whose value and comprehension appear as universal. Therefore poetry is "more philosophical and more elevated than history" (καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ἱστορίας ἐστίν).

When Aristotle discusses 'poetry' in generic terms (as is clear in *Poetics* 23), he evidently refers to a form of narration (the one typical of epics), which he sees as a sort of "narrative mimesis in verse" (περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς) (1459a17). On this he establishes the quality of the narrated action that should be grounded on a single, coherent (i.e. based on a relationship of mutual necessity among its parts) and accomplished (i.e. with a precise beginning and end) action. These are basi-

<sup>3</sup> By introducing such a clear-cut distinction, Aristotle probably wished to take a stand against the idea according to which historiography and poetry shared a common matrix. Later sources reveal this kind of awareness. Strabo, for instance, asserted that Hecataeus, Pherecydes, and the early prose writers had abandoned poetic metre but had maintained the rest (Strab. 1.26: "Afterwards it was closely imitated by writers in the time of Cadmus, Pherecydes, and Hecataeus. The metre was the only thing dispensed with, every other poetic grace being carefully preserved" (trans. by H.C. Hamilton) (εἶτα ἐκείνην [i.e. τὴν ποιητικὴν κατασκευὴν] μιμούμενοι, λύσαντες τὸ μέτρον, τὰλλα δὲ φυλάξαντες τὰ ποιητικά, συνέγραψαν οἱ περὶ Κάδμον καὶ Φερεκύδη καὶ Ἐκαταῖον· εἶτα οἱ ὕστερον ἀφαιροῦντες ἀεὶ τι τῶν τοιούτων εἰς τὸ νῦν εἶδος κατήγαγον ὡς ἂν ἀπὸ ὕψους τινός). Fifth-century Latin rhetorician Marcellinus argued that Thucydides' main literary model was Homer, with regard to both the lexical choices and the argument's disposition (*Vita Thucydidis*, 37). On the proximity of historiography and poetry, see Buti de Lima 1996: 79-84.

cally the same requirements he asks of tragedy (1459a17-25);<sup>4</sup> they define a narrative form which clearly departs from the historiographical model (in which the exposition may not concern a single and limited event only, but has to deal with all the events included in a given period of time).

However, the Aristotelian distinction between the two genres and the related epistemological depreciation of historiography appear to be overly artificial and certainly do not do full justice to the works of the great fifth-century Greek historians.<sup>5</sup> Of course historiography and epics differ under many respects. Suffice it to recall here how the epic poets traditionally appealed to the Muses or to a divinity who may inspire their song, while the historians referred to what they had seen, and proudly mention their own investigation. It is, however, a fact that classical Greek historians adopted many elements deriving from the epic narrative format, so much so that many scholars have referred to this phenomenon as to the “historization of epics” (“Historisierung des Epos”, Schwartz 1928).<sup>6</sup> Beyond the differences in methods and aims, epic and historical narrations are linked by absolute proximity and this connection is so strong that it never fails to appear, even in Thucydides, whose approach is extremely pragmatic and rigorous. The Homeric traditional model, in which the characters were very often allowed to speak, made that same technique seem natural also

<sup>4</sup> “As regards narrative mimesis in verse, it is clear that plots, as in tragedy, should be constructed dramatically, that is, around a single, whole and complete action, with beginning, middle, and end, so that epic, like a single and whole animal, may produce the pleasure proper to it. Its structures should not be like histories, which require an exposition not of a single action but of a single period of time, with all the events (in their contingent relationship) that happened to one person or more during it” (Trans. by S. Halliwell) (περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς, ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις συνιστάναι δραματικούς καὶ περὶ μίαν πράξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν ἔχουσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, ἵν’ ὡσπερ ζῶον ἐν ὅλῳ ποιῆ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν, δῆλον, καὶ μὴ ὁμοίαις ἱστορίαις τὰς συνθέσεις εἶναι, ἐν αἷς ἀνάγκη οὐχὶ μᾶς πράξεως ποιῆσθαι δῆλωσιν ἀλλ’ ἐνὸς χρόνου, ὅσα ἐν τούτῳ συνέβη περὶ ἓνα ἢ πλείους, ὧν ἕκαστον ὡς ἔτυχεν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα).

<sup>5</sup> One may even say that in Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ works – as is in tragedy – the protagonists’ παθήματα [‘passions’, ‘affections’] can at times take on ideal and paradigmatic meanings, transforming single events into universal experiences that reflect the human condition. Let us look, for example, at the tales of Gyges and Candaules (1.8-13), Croesus and Solon (1.28-33) or Adrastus and Atys (1.34-45) in Herodotus’ *Histories*. On the similarities between Thucydides’ works and tragic patterns, see Cornford’s 1907 fundamental contribution.

<sup>6</sup> In the Hellenistic period the development of a model of ‘tragic historiography’ could be associated with the principles of the Peripatetic school which overthrew their founder’s theory, conceiving a universal form of historiography that could be similar to poetry. According to Kurt Von Fritz, this model dates back to Duris of Samos, a disciple of Theophrastus’. A contrary opinion on this issue can be found in Walbank 1960.

when introduced in the historians' narration (see Strasburger 1972; Rengakos 2006). In this perspective, we can say that Herodotus' and Thucydides' historical discourse corresponds to a form of diegesis that, in Plato's classification (*Rep.* 392d8), mixes third-person "sheer diegesis" (ἀπλῆ διήγησις) with a narrative mode that follows a mimetic strategy that has the author hide behind the characters (διὰ μιμήσεως).<sup>7</sup> Just like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Herodotus' *Histories* and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* are examples of an interaction between the mimetic and the diegetic procedures, that is, an account of the events in which the heterodiegetic exposition alternates with the mimetic representation of dialogues and speeches. Scholars are called to verify the presence of these two dimensions, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as their functions with regard to the addressee, never losing sight of a general cultural frame which entailed an exclusively oral fruition of the texts.

## 2. The Relationship Between Mimesis and Orality

Another aspect that we should preliminarily define is the relationship between mimesis and orality. In this regard, we should interrogate how and to what extent the use of mimesis within a basically diegetic narrative form, such as the historiographical one, is connected with the modes of production and use of a work, that is, with its oral consumption. We may think that the audience of the *akroàseis* (public readings) of Herodotus' stories would be inclined to appreciate a livelier and more animated expressive form, rich in direct speeches. If we followed this interpretation, we could imagine that the historiographer, who publicly recited excerpts from his works in public, would have felt the need to involve the audience emotionally, and direct speech may have perfectly served his purpose.

In my opinion, this approach is not wholly correct and it would be misleading to evaluate the presence of direct speeches from such perspective. If the issue may be tackled in this way with reference to the composition and performance of the Homeric poems, the same is not necessarily true with regard to historiography. Herodotus was no rhapsode: his prose, although rich in speeches and oral markers, could not produce the same emotional involvement that epic or lyric poetry (in which prosody, rhythm, and music have a fundamental import) could bring about. Sure enough, Herodotus had to come to terms with the audience's tastes and expectations, which, for instance, may explain his peculiar interest for ethnograph-

<sup>7</sup> "So don't they achieve this either by a simple narrative, or by means of imitation, or a combination of both?" (trans. by C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy) (ἀρ' οὖν οὐχὶ ἤτοι ἀπλῆ διηγήσει ἢ διὰ μιμήσεως γιγνομένη ἢ δι' ἀμφοτέρων περαίνουσιν).

ic aspects (see Dorati 2000); besides, these aspects could very well satisfy the audience's curiosity and were firmly entrenched in logographic tradition (Ion of Chios). Furthermore, Herodotus' work as a book is one thing, the context of its dissemination in the communication system of the time is quite another.

The oral dissemination of the *Histories* is a notorious *vexata quaestio*. Ancient sources tell of 'public readings' of Herodotus' works (Thucydides himself makes such an allusion in 1.22.4),<sup>8</sup> even though this oral dissemination likely concerns an early compositional stage. Scholars agree on the fact that Herodotus early conceived his *Histories* as a written text, and as such it has been acknowledged from Thucydides onwards. Truth to tell, Thucydides' own works, which were never performed (see Morrison 2007) and in which mimesis and diegesis often coexist, prove how much the oral perspective can be misleading in a historiographical context. Finally, we can say that both Thucydides and Herodotus operated within a changing communicative system, characterized by the passage from orality to literacy. Both of them supposed that their texts could possibly have a double destination (reading and listening), but conceived them as books written to be read in a time well beyond their own epoch (we should not forget Thucydides' famous κτήμα ἐς αἰεὶ, "perennial possession", 1.2). The presence of direct speeches has nothing to do with the issue of oral composition or with the entertainment of the audience, but is an artistic communication mode which enables a connection with tradition (epos), whose aims are structurally concerned with the narrative organization of the text.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time" (trans. by R. Crawley) (καὶ ἐς μὲν ἀκρόασιν ἴσως τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες αὐτῶν ἀτερπέστερον φανεῖται· ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὖθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἀρκούντως ἔξει. κτήμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παρὰ χρόνον ἀκούειν ζύγκεται). All translations from Thucydides' *History* are taken from Crawley 1910. See also Thucydides' polemic against the stories that poets and logographers conceived in order to catch the audience's attention rather than to transmit the truth of the matter (1.21).

<sup>9</sup> The way in which Thucydides and Herodotus organize the narrated material and the length of the narration presuppose a separation from the practice of oral composition and fruition. Rösler 2002 clarifies this point by analysing the verbs γράφειν ("to write") and λέγειν ("to read").



### 3. Diegesis and Mimesis in the Herodotean Model

Over the past few decades, many studies have dealt with the identification of the main narratological features of Herodotus' *ιστορίη* (de Jong 1999; 2004). Here we are apparently concerned with an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, as Genette (1980; 1988) would have it, that is, a story in which the narrator is never present in the world of his/her tale and therefore always stands back from the narrated action. The diegetic axis is cohesive and extremely solid, even though it is often intersected by now longer now shorter excursuses that contribute to detail or broaden the discourse (the most significant and emblematic instance of this are the so-called informative digressions that follow the reference to a new place or to a new people).

Herodotus is a typically omniscient narrator, in that he knows from the start how his tale will end (the outcome of the Persian wars) and also knows what the different characters think or say, their private thoughts and feelings included.<sup>10</sup> A striking example of this stance can be found in the well-known episode of Gyges and Candaules in Book 1 (8-13), in which diegesis and mimesis are skilfully intertwined. In order to convince his favourite bodyguard, Gyges, of his own wife's incredible beauty, the king of Lydia, Candaules, suggests that Gyges spy on her naked. At first Gyges refuses and Herodotus assigns him a direct speech (mimetic level) in which he argues for his decision on the basis of ethic and social principles (a woman who shows herself naked to a stranger loses her modesty, besides one should look at what is his only). Yet, Herodotus adds an underlying consideration to Gyges' *oratio recta* (direct speech), voicing something that the bodyguard had in mind but did not speak out, that is, his fear that such an adventure could "cause him some harm" (μή τί οἱ ἐξ αὐτῶν γένηται κακόν, 1.9.1). Thus, the narrator informs his readers that Gyges' caution depended on personal reasons (fear for himself) rather than on moral concerns (the preservation of the queen's honour).<sup>11</sup>

His omniscient point of view often allows the author to recall past elements through analepsis or to anticipate subsequent ones through prolepsis. In fact, Herodotean diegesis does not generally follow a linear sequence, but revolves around a central chronological core – from 560 to 479

<sup>10</sup> See also Grethlein 2013: 185-222 who relates Herodotus' omniscient narration to a fundamentally teleological conception of time in contrast to the purely empirical approach Thucydides adopted to reconstruct past events. On the narrative modes Herodotus and Thucydides employ in order to build up a picture of the past, see especially Rood 2007a and 2007b.

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to compare this tale to the anonymous papyrus fragment (POxy 2382), possibly from a play on Gyges and Candaules (fr. 664 TrGF 2), whose form, despite the dramatic context, is purely diegetic.

BC – with frequent use of analeptic and proleptic references that bring in allusions to previous or later periods (from the history of ancient Egypt to the Peloponnesian war).

The Herodotean narrator is also characteristically omnipresent. He is ‘present’ in all the spaces in which the narration takes place, be they open and public (squares, battlefields, etc.), near (the Greek cities), far (the distant Oriental territories) or even private (royal courts, secluded bedrooms, etc.). One may very well affirm that omniscience and omnipresence makes of Herodotus a Homeric narrator. Indeed, a number of scholars have pointed out several analogies with epic: the above-mentioned presence of direct speeches, but also the presence of catalogues, genealogical lists, digressions, chiasmic narrative microstructures, etc.<sup>12</sup> Herodotus differentiates himself from that model in that he presents himself (and is) as a self-conscious narrator, that is, a narrator who is aware of being one, rather than a chronicler who does not go beyond the mere illustration of the events. On the contrary, he organizes them into a specific structure, according to knowingly chosen methods and patterns. In the *Histories*’ opening paragraph he even mentions his own name and proudly introduces the *ἵστορίη* (‘inquiry’) that he will carry out in the first person.<sup>13</sup> This aspect belittles Herodotus’ prerogative as omniscient narrator; indeed, his point of view is not always completely omniscient, as he frequently offers more than one version of the same event without taking sides with one or the other alternative.<sup>14</sup> Yet another indication of this stance is given by the presence of relativizing lexical formulas, such as “I believe”, “it seems to me” (ἐγὼ δοκέω, μοι δοκεῖ) through which he conveys the feeling that what he is giving us are hypothetical and not actual representations. These phrases, referring to the first person singular, that is, to himself (authorial interventions), allow the historian to express a personal opinion, to formulate a supposition, at times to allude to a source of information, to endorse or deny a particular version of the events. In these cases,

<sup>12</sup> The anonymous compiler of *On the Sublime* already defined Herodotus as “Homeric to the highest degree” (μόνος Ἡρόδοτος Ὀμηρικώτατος ἐγένετο, *Subl.* 13.3).

<sup>13</sup> In some respects this incipit is an overtly parabolic *προλογίζεσθαι* (“to speak a prologue”), which is remindful of the Hesiodic (*Theogony*) rather than Homeric narrative model.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, in 1.191.1, with regard to Cyrus’ siege of Babylon and the subterfuge he devised in order to penetrate the city (by fording the river that flowed into it), he writes: “Whether someone advised him in his difficulty, or whether he perceived for himself what to do, I do not know, but he did the following”, trans. by A.D. Godley (εἴτε δὴ ὄν ἄλλος οἱ ἀπορέοντι ὑπεθήκατο, εἴτε καὶ αὐτὸς ἔμαθε τὸ ποιητέον οἱ ἦν, ἐποίησε δὴ τοιόνδε). Another example can be found in 3.87, where he provides two different and alternative versions of the way in which Darius won the kingdom (“some say that . . . but there is another story, . . .”, trans. by A.D. Godley; οἱ μὲν δὴ φασι . . . οἱ δὲ). All translations from Herodotus’ *Histories* are taken from Godley 1926.

one perceives a rift between the world of epic narration and the one of historiography, in which the author must piece together the events by choosing among different and more or less verisimilar options.

The Herodotean model apparently struggles to maintain and compare the testimonies drawn from the sources, introducing them by pointing out their differences (much more than what happens in Thucydides who summarizes the material in a unified discourse). Sometimes Herodotus does not hesitate to compete with his informers showing his readers/listeners how he has elaborated a certain thesis independently from what he has heard or read from other sources. He is interested in underlining his autonomy, and this emerges from certain passages in which he openly tries to relativize the pieces of information he has collected and declares he will look for proofs (τεκμήρια) that may support or deny what he has heard.

One last observation on the Herodotean narrative model and on its narrator needs to be added here. Still employing modern narratological categories, we may say that the Halicarnassian historian is also a 'dramatic' narrator, that is, a narrator who has no share in the events he relates and never appears as a character, and yet speaks sometimes in his own voice, for example when he tells about himself and the journeys he made in order to collect information. In this regard, we may quote a brief excerpt from Book 2 in which he writes:

Θέλων δὲ τούτων πέρι σαφές τι εἰδέναι ἐξ ὧν οἶόν τε ἦν, ἔπλωσα καὶ ἐς Τύρον τῆς Φοινίκης, πυθθανόμενος αὐτόθι εἶναι ἱρὸν Ἡρακλέος ἁγίον. Καὶ εἶδον πλουσίως κατεσκευασμένον ἄλλοισί τε πολλοῖσι ἀναθήμασι . . . Ἐς λόγους δὲ ἐλθὼν τοῖσι ἱρεῦσι τοῦ θεοῦ εἰρόμην ὁκόσος χρόνος εἶη ἐξ οὗ σφι τὸ ἱρὸν ἴδρυται· εὗρον δὲ . . . Εἶδον δὲ ἐν τῇ Τύρῳ καὶ ἄλλο ἱρὸν . . . Ἀπικόμην δὲ καὶ ἐς Θάσον (2.44)

[wishing to get clear information about this matter where it was possible so to do, I took ship for Tyre in Phoenicia, where I had learned by inquiry that there was a holy temple of Heracles. There I saw it, richly equipped with many other offerings . . . in conversation with the priests, I asked how long it was since their temple was built. I found that . . . At Tyre I saw yet another temple . . . Then I went to Thasos, too.]

The passages in which Herodotus presents himself in the first person as investigator of the sources and facts outside the narrative time frame are not many, but are definitely very significant, since they fundamentally aim at orienting the reception and the comprehension of the text.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus appears as dramatized narrator also when he expresses his own judgments on the narrated events. For example in 1.60.3, when he defines the stratagem adopted by the Athenians to recall Peisistratus from exile (making a woman disguise as the goddess Athena) "so exceptionally foolish" (εὐηθέστατον). On the direct presence of Herodotus in his *Histories*, see Darbo-Peschanski 1987: 107ff.

Exploring the mimetic dimension of the Herodotean narration, we are essentially concerned with the presence of direct speeches, that is, of moments in which, as Plato would put it, the narrator “hides himself” (ἀποκρύπτοιο, *Rep.* 3 393d7)<sup>16</sup> behind the protagonists of the tale. As we have already pointed out, this expressive mode – which from Herodotus onwards would establish itself as a structural element of the ancient historiographical genre – derived from the Homeric epos, in which it was largely employed (it has been calculated that, in Homer, almost half of the lines are written in direct speech; see Latacz 1975: 395). After all, it is no surprise that, in order to chronicle an event as important as the Persian wars, the narrator made use of narrative structures similar to the ones Homer employed to tell about the war of Troy. Engaging with this mimetic dimension in a diegetic context was perceived as totally natural and unproblematic by a historian such as Herodotus, nor did he ever interrogate on the nature and characteristics of direct speeches (as Thucydides did). He managed the oscillation between mimesis and diegesis very smoothly, without affecting the narrative flux in terms of interruptions or loss of cohesiveness and solidity.<sup>17</sup>

When a character speaks a direct speech, the narrator maintains his main narrative function, although he momentarily steps aside and gives the focalization over to a secondary focalizer. This instantly makes the tale livelier and more dramatic, and certainly also less objective, and yet more varied and engaging. Of course, the character who pronounces a direct speech is not an extradiegetic omniscient narrator but speaks as one actively involved in the action. Time after time, the interlocutors focalize and understand the events reported by the omniscient narrator from their own specific point of view and may even interpret them in a different way. The

<sup>16</sup> “But if the poet were not to conceal his identity anywhere, the whole of his poetry and narrative would have been created without imitation” (trans. by C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy) (εἰ δέ γε μηδαμοῦ ἑαυτὸν ἀποκρύπτοιο ὁ ποιητής, πᾶσα ἂν αὐτῷ ἄνευ μιμήσεως ἢ ποιήσις τε καὶ διήγησις γεγονυῖα εἴη).

<sup>17</sup> It is unclear whether, before Herodotus, genealogical and geographic prose writers, such as Hecataeus of Miletus, had already used the direct speech form. The few surviving fragments do not allow to answer this question, even though fragment *FGrHist* 1F30 seems to contain a direct speech. According to Marcellinus (*Vita Thucydidis*, 38), the narrations of the logographers and the historians before Herodotus were “always exclusively” composed of “pure narration” (ψιλῆ μόνῃ . . . διὰ παντὸς διηγῆσαι), so that it was Herodotus who introduced the speeches in order to foreground the characters’ peculiarities. A case in point of direct speech embedded in a historical narration can be found in Ion of Chios’ *Epidemiai* which presents a mimetic dramatization of a convivial incident during Sophocles’ sojourn at Chios (*TGrHist* 392F6 = Athen. 13.603E 3 = Soph. T 75 Radt). The text can be dated between 441 BC and a few years before 421, since in his *Peace* Aristophanes alludes to the fact that Ion had died some time before.

presence of several direct speeches and, as a consequence, of multiple secondary focalizations suggests a polyphonic structure, whilst the author never loses the control of the narration.

In Herodotus, the mimetic mode is widely employed and its presence corresponds to almost the 18% of the whole text (Scardino 2007). The passage from diegesis to mimesis is normally made clear by Herodotus by means of introductory cataphoric formulas, such as *τάδε ἔλεγε* (“he said these things”) and closing anaphoric ones as *ταῦτα ἔλεγε* (“he said these things”), according to a formal mechanism that once again reproduces the Homeric use. One can further notice that the direct speeches are generally placed at strategic moments of the narration, thus functioning as a bridge joining the narrative segments. They work as pauses, as it were, in the narration and slow down the action. This attracts the audience’s attention and raises the tension, since their presence often highlight an impending change in a character’s or in a people’s destiny or the passage from peaceful tranquillity to active restlessness.

With reference to Lang’s enquiry (1984), we may list the following formal typologies of speeches:

- a. single speeches (without response), which mainly contain orders, warnings, and announcements;
- b. double speeches (antilogies), which normally follow a question-and-answer pattern;
- c. a set of three speeches, which generally follow a thesis-antithesis-synthesis agonistic pattern. The third interlocutor normally wraps up the debate by choosing one of the theses that have been previously introduced or advocating a mediation. A classical example of this comes from the so-called *tripolitikòs logos* in Book 3 (80-2) where Otanes suggests abandoning monarchy in the name of isonomy, Megabyzus recommends the adoption of an oligarchic regime, and Darius praises the monarchy.
- d. a set of four speeches in which a topic is discussed in two phases: the first starts the argument and the second elaborates on the issue or changes and adjusts the perspective;
- e. five-, six-, seven-, eight-, nine-, or even ten-fold groups of speeches are less frequently used but can be found, for instance, in the well-known conversation (1.30-2) between Croesus and Solon, in Sardis, upon the meaning of human happiness; this exchange is composed of eight direct speech interventions, divided into two tetrads each composed of two question-and-answer pairs.

As regards the functions of direct speech within the narration, the most significant ones may be categorized as follows:<sup>18</sup>

1. *causative* function: when direct speech is placed at the beginning of a chain of events and starts off an action. The speaker's words prompt the action (the speaker's own or someone else's);<sup>19</sup>
2. *explanatory* function: when direct speech is placed at the end of a chain of events and functions as commentary or provides considerations, without initiating a new action. Of course, the orator's ensuing explanations have no authorial value since they do not necessarily coincide with the ones accepted by the historian;<sup>20</sup>
3. *dramatizing* function: it mainly serves the purpose of enlivening the narration by having a character express his/her thoughts, announcing events, ask questions, give reasons, explanations or advice. Yet, this is not simply a way to animate the chronicle in order to get the readers'/listeners' attention. In fact, it sometimes looks as if Herodotus were arranging a proper dramaturgical script revolving around typically theatrical turns. It is not easy to determine to what extent theatre, and especially tragedy, may have influenced his use of mimesis, but a few episodes, such as Adrastus' and Atys' 'tragic' vicissitudes in Book 1 (34-5), are based on a series of dialogic scenes in which mimesis naturally prevails, hinting at the text's performative dimension;<sup>21</sup>
4. characters' *typification* function: by quoting the characters' own words in direct form, it provides a psychological portrait of the speaker. It is the so-called *ethopoeia*, a technique used to create specific characters – even though this does not appear to be frequently used in Herodotus. In fact, from a stylistic and expressive point of view, the way ordinary people speak does not differ too much from the one of kings and military commanders. The characters comply

<sup>18</sup> From a functional standpoint, Paavo Hohti (1976) divides direct speech into two fundamental typologies: the "causative" one (the person who speaks illustrates a project, makes a wish, or expresses an idea he/she would like to realize) and the "non causative" one (speeches which are not directly context-related and basically convey the orator's evaluation or interpretation of an event without actually influencing the action).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Herodotus 1.121: Astyages' words persuade Cyrus to leave for Persia.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Herodotus 2.78: the servant's address to the banqueters illustrates the reason why a coffin containing the sculpted image of a corpse is carried around (as a reminder of the inevitability of death).

<sup>21</sup> For a narratological analysis of Adrastus' and Atys' episode, see de Jong 2005. On the comparison between Herodotean dramatization and tragic theatre, see Sancho-Montés 2003a; 2003b.

with stereotypical and barely individualized features: Xerxes is the typically immature and reckless tyrant who acts in the shadow of his father, Darius, without possessing his greatness; in 1.30-1, Solon and Croesus symbolize the wise and the powerful man, respectively. In other words, Herodotus does not aim at outlining specific psychological individualities, but rather at presenting conceptions and behaviours that transcend single individuals;

5. *ideological* function: direct speeches often provide an interpretative key to the deep-rooted meaning of the narration, in the light of reflections on the specificity of the narrated situation and on human condition at large. This does not normally happen in the omniscient narrator's diegetic account, but rather in mimetic direct speeches, which display a secondary focalization. It is within this latter context that Herodotus tends to clarify the key concepts of his *Weltanschauung*, his own ethic conception as well as the values upon which one should evaluate historical events. This function appears to be particularly expedient when the speeches are meant to highlight a deliberative dynamics. In this regard, it does not come as a surprise that in Croesus' and Solon's episode, which is considered one of the key passages for the comprehension of Herodotus' ethic and religious ideas, he mainly employs *oratio obliqua* (indirect speech). On a total of ninety-three lines (see Asheri 1988), fifty-three are direct speech (57%) and the rest is pure diegesis. In the subsequent episode concerning Adrastus and Atys, which is connected with and clarifies the one of Croesus and Solon, we find a large portion of direct speech (fifty-one lines on 111, that is, 46%). The use of direct speech increases at ideologically crucial moments of the narration, when the narrated event takes on a paradigmatic tragic course (as when Croesus tries to prevent the fulfilment of the oracle that predicted his son's death, even though to no avail). Moreover, dialogic mimesis allows the narrator to achieve a problematic dramatization of alternative points of view, thus producing a 'judicial' fruition of the events – similar to the one that is inherent in the dialogues and rhetorical contests represented on stage. As I will try to demonstrate in the following section with reference to Xerxes' Council (7.8-19), the choice of relating an important deliberation with momentous historical repercussions by showing the 'dramatic' procedure which originated that same procedure bears significant ideological consequences. By adopting this strategy, not only does the historian amplify the fictional dimension out of all proportion and engage his listeners and/or readers emotionally, but he also frees himself (or better, pretends to do so) from the responsibility

of pronouncing those words, thus producing a supplementary ideological impact. In other words, by embedding theatrical mimesis into the historiographical narration, the author efficaciously sanctions his own suggested disapproval of the way in which the Persians decree a new assault against the Greeks.

#### 4. Mimesis and Deliberative Dynamics: Xerxes' Council.

One of the most significant excerpts in the whole of Herodotus' work is the set of four speeches that we find in Book 7 (8-19). This passage, in which mimesis prevails and which could be read as a theatrical script, dramatizes Xerxes' Council in Susa, the Persian capital, in 483 BC. Nobles and royal functionaries are discussing the opportunity whether to march against Greece. Xerxes is the first and the last to speak, following a chiasmic pattern. His speeches are interpolated by Mardonius' and Artabanus' speeches, which support two antithetical arguments, while the other councillors remain silent and do not influence Xerxes' decision. The imagined setting is the king's palace, a closed rather than public space which is consciously chosen in order to convey to the Greek readers the typical scenario of a self-referential monarchical regime, totally alien to the deliberative dynamics that rule Athens and the Asian Ionic *poleis*. This four-fold sequence of speeches revolves around the Persian perspective and is clearly a Herodotean invention since the Greek historian could not have attended that meeting, nor could he have derived its chronicle from a source. Aeschylus used the same device when he conceived the setting of *The Persians* in Atossa's royal palace.

With his recent victorious expedition to crush the Egyptian rebellion in mind (7.7), Xerxes delivers a long and rhetorically sound introductory speech in which he expounds his invasion plan as if it had already been defined (7.8): he is determined to conquer and submit Greece in order to vindicate his father Darius. He refers to the belligerent tradition that has characterized the Persian people since the days of Cyrus and Cambyses as well as to the Persian innate expansionist tendency. The most important aspect of Xerxes' speech is the fact that he simply announces what should be done ("thus it must be done", ποιητέα μὲν νῦν ταῦτά ἐστι οὕτω, *ibid.*), suggesting no alternatives and speaking on the basis of a pre-defined action plan, although hypocritically inviting the council to express their opinion, "so that I not seem to you to have my own way" (ἵνα δὲ μὴ ἰδιοβουλέειν ὑμῖν δοκέω, *ibid.*). From the very beginning, the readers/listeners understand that this context is not one of a popular open assembly, similar to the Athenian gatherings, but that Xerxes is exclusively looking for the confirmation of a decision which has already been made.



There follow the speeches of the two generals, Mardonius and Artabanus, supporting two opposite points of view. Mardonius (7.9) is wholly in favour of the war; he greatly praises Xerxes and optimistically believes that the Persian army will defeat the Greeks because of their slothfulness and lack of military preparation. Mardonius' speech sounds as an authentic apology of Persian imperialism to which is added a theorization of Greek moral and martial inferiority. For his part, Artabanus, Xerxes' paternal uncle, begins to speak by recalling Darius' disastrous expedition against the Scythians and by warning against the danger that Xerxes too may fail (7.10). He therefore advises for caution, invites the king to think his decision over and take his time to consider all the risks it may imply. He relies on moral arguments that can be traced back to the concept of divine φθόνος (ὁ θεὸς φθονήσας, *ibid.*), the 'envy of the gods' which moves them to punish the mortals who dare exceed their own limits ("for the god loves to bring low all things of surpassing greatness").<sup>22</sup> As is well-known, this is a concept to which Herodotus often alludes (for instance, in the dialogues between Croesus and Solon, 1.30-3, or in the novella of Polycrates, 3.39-43).

As in a typical *Ringkomposition*, Xerxes takes the floor once again and closes this set of four speeches (7.11) by violently accusing Artabanus of being a coward and declaring that he will not punish him as he deserves only because he is his father's brother. He publicly vilifies him saying that he is unworthy of participating in the campaign and should stay behind with the women. He enumerates once more the reasons of the war, still mentioning one's duty to be faithful to tradition and the necessity to practice revenge; besides, he adds, the conflict with Greece is inevitable, hence they might as well attack them first so that they may avert a Greek expedition against Persia.

The whole passage is presented in a totally mimetic mode and all interventions are punctuated by introductory and closing comments, following a modality which can be frequently found in Herodotus, in Thucydides, and already in epos: "Xerxes spoke as follows" (ἔλεγε Ξέρξης τάδε), "So spoke and ceased" (ταῦτα εἶπας ἐπαύετο), "after him, Mardonius said" (μετ' αὐτὸν δὲ Μαρδόνιος ἔλεγε), "Thus Mardonius smoothed Xerxes' resolution and stopped" (Μαρδόνιος μὲν τοσαῦτα ἐπιλεήνας τὴν Ξέρξω γνώμην ἐπέπαυτο), "then Artabanus . . . said" (Ἀρτάβανος . . . ἔλεγε τάδε), "Thus spoke Artabanus" (Ἀρτάβανος μὲν ταῦτα ἔλεξε), "Xerxes answered angrily" (Ξέρξης δὲ θυμωθεὶς ἀμείβεται τοῖσδε), "he said these things" (ταῦτα μὲν . . . ἐλέγετο).

In the Herodotean account, Xerxes' expedition against Greece finds yet another justification in the subsequent episode of the king's dreams, which

<sup>22</sup> φιλέει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τὰ ὑπερέχοντα πάντα κολοῦειν (7.10).

supplements the Council's debate. However, it is worth examining here what effect this mimetic four-fold sequence of speeches must have had on Herodotus' audience (ideological function). In a specific moment of his chronicle, the narrator interrupts the diegetic frame and leaves the focalization to the 'speaking' characters and, in particular, to Xerxes; this leads to a dramatization of the deliberative process that unfolds under the eyes of the readers/listeners the way in which the Persians reached the decision to attack Greece. This kind of '*mise en scène*' exposes the faults that a Greek eye/ear was likely to perceive as peculiar to an autocratic mentality, according to which the Council's meeting is nothing more than a specious fiction. In fact, the king has already made his decision and would not tolerate to be contradicted, yet he expects his pronouncements to be ratified and praised. Moreover, this almost totally mimetic section also performs an ideological function: Herodotus can efficaciously justify the great political and military event he is illustrating – the second Persian war – by orienting the comprehension of its moral and political meaning. If, on the one hand, the theatrical mimetic mode is functional to the dramatization of the event, on the other hand, it serves the purpose of averring its ideological and pragmatic content thanks to the judicial form, arranged according to a dramatic modality with which the audience was totally familiar.

## 5. Diegesis and Mimesis in Thucydides

Apart from methodological and conceptual dissimilarities between the Thucydidean and the Herodotean models, their exposition reveals many similarities with special regard to the diegetic dimension. Thucydides' narration is once again mainly extradiegetic (i.e. entrusted to an omniscient narrator who tells the story from outside the universe of the text), with zero focalization, intentionally constructed as a chain of narrative segments following one another according to logical and chronological criteria. These segments are related to each other by means of introductory or transitional formulae as well as instances of analepsis and prolepsis of events not included in the historical period under scrutiny (the years of the Peloponnesian war). The way in which the narrative segments are connected endows the text with a greater sense of cohesion and homogeneity than the Herodotean one (Thucydides especially avoids ethnographic explanatory excursuses and significantly reduces the digressions referring to possible different versions, viewed as alternative to the accepted one). Authorial first-person interventions, through which the writer voices subjective or metanarrative evaluations, are also uncommon (see, for example, the passage on methodological issues in 1.21-2) and so is the expression of personal doubts or uncertainty

about the sources (see, for instance, 6.54-5 on the circulating versions of the tyrannicide committed by Harmodius and Aristogeiton).

In Thucydides, the diegetic dimension also intersects mimesis when, through the insertion of direct speeches, the author hands over focalization to the protagonists of the events. The passages in which mimesis prevails correspond to the 20-25% of the whole text, a slightly higher percentage than what we find in Herodotus.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the passage from diegesis to mimesis generally appears to be more elaborate than in Herodotus; in addition to the usual introductory and closing formulae, relying on various *verba dicendi* (verbs of saying),<sup>24</sup> Thucydides also provides rather precise pieces of information about the context and the circumstances of the speech or speeches he reports by adding a synthetic account of the speakers' reasons and of the debate's outcome. In this regard, his narrative organization proves particularly useful in blending mimesis and diegesis, so that the transition from one to the other turns out to be as smooth as possible.<sup>25</sup>

Most speeches belong to the deliberative genre and are related to important decision-making moments which entail the discussion of political issues such as peace, war, alliances, etc. We often find two or more speeches linked together in an antilogic form or in antithetical pairs. On the one hand, this mechanism is remindful of the contemporary (sophistic) rhetorical techniques and, on the other, of a deeply antinomic conception of social, political, and military dynamics (Athens vs Sparta, democracy vs oligarchy, strength vs weakness, past vs present, *logos vs ergon*, Nicias vs Alcibiades, etc.). The essential functions of Thucydidean speeches are the same we listed for Herodotus, yet, while their use of the *causative* and *explanatory* functions basically coincide, the other three functions (3, 4, and 5 above) are worth exploring with regard to their original employment in Thucydides.

The *dramatizing* function fundamentally conveys the reader in the midst of an agon which produces decisions of great import for the continuation of the events. The reader is called to compare the characters' different stances and evaluate the whole decision-making process. On his part, the

<sup>23</sup> The greatest part of direct speeches can be found in the first books, perhaps because Thucydides managed to endow them with a more accomplished artistic form. The data on the percentage mimetic passages in Thucydides are taken from Scardino 2007: 458, but see also Lang 2011: 156.

<sup>24</sup> Introductory formulas: "he said"; "he said these things"; "he said this"; "he said these words" (ἔλεξε; ταῦτα ἔλεξε; τάδε ἔλεξε; τοιούτους λόγους εἶπεν). Closing formulas: "he said these things" (τοσαῦτα, τοιαῦτα ἔλεξε), etc.

<sup>25</sup> On the way in which Thucydides introduces and concludes his dialogues see Westlake 1973 and Pavlou 2013.

narrator never openly takes sides as to the content of a direct speech and never corrects what the characters say, but rather aims each time at shedding light on the reasons of the disputes. Despite the absence of overt authorial comments, at times the historian hints at his own opinions, for example when he introduces and contextualizes the events. A fine instance of this can be found in Book 6, in the context of the speeches that precede the expedition against Syracuse. After Nicias' (who speaks against the war) and before Alcibiades' intervention in the assembly, the narrator sheds a totally unfavourable light on the latter, presenting him as the one who was "by far the warmest advocate of the expedition" (ἐνῆγε δὲ προθυμώτατα τὴν στρατείαν), eager to oppose Nicias, his political adversary (βουλόμενος τῷ τε Νικίᾳ ἐναντιοῦσθαι), and urged by his personal ambition "to become strategos" (καὶ μάλιστα στρατηγῆσαί τε ἐπιθυμῶν) as well as by the hope of improving his finances (6.15.2-3). The Melian dialogue (5.85-113) – which I will discuss further in § 6 below – is a particularly significant example of this dramatizing function, as to which I believe one can legitimately compare historiography to the theatre.

The *characters typification* appears to be underdeveloped in Thucydides, too; generally speaking, no specific linguistic or stylistic features, which may contribute to individualizing one character or the other, seem to emerge in his prose. Rather than offering a psychological portrait of the characters, by using direct speeches Thucydides aims at shaping different types who fulfil exemplary functions: Nicias, for instance, represents the paradigm of the wise and trustworthy political leader, while Alcibiades corresponds to the ambitious, rash, and individualistic one.<sup>26</sup> However, the orators often happen to be anonymous and referred to only by a collective name (the Athenians, the Spartans, the Melians). Also in this regard, Thucydides is much closer to Herodotus than one may suppose. What matters for him is the dynamics of the political and military actions, while the delineation of the characters' different features is actually a strategy he uses to analyze the events, rather than the result of a conscious *ethopoeia*. A clear example of this is Cleon's speech on the punitive expedition against Mytilene in Book 3 (36.6-40), the only one that we find in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*; its context is an Athenian assembly dealing with the opportunity to punish the Mytileneans for the 428 BC revolt. Cleon embodies the demagogic leader, the champion of the so-called radical democracy – much different from the Periclean model. He is always more preoccupied with his personal advantage than with the good of the community

<sup>26</sup> On the characterization of Nicias e Alcibiades, see Tompkins 1972, who rather emphasized the ethopoetic aspects (different expressive and argumentative styles) that Thucydides supposedly employed in order to individualize the two Athenian leaders. With regard to Archidamus' speech in 1.80-5, see also Tompkins 1993.

and, in this case, he supports the tough line. Thucydides is totally unsympathetic towards him and makes his position rather clear. He presents him as “the most violent man at Athens” (βιαιότατος τῶν πολιτῶν), capable of slyly winning the people’s favour (3.36.6). Other sources tell us that Cleon would deliver impassioned harangues gesticulating wildly and moving up and down the tribune.<sup>27</sup> Now, Thucydides’ Cleon makes a lengthy argument on the Athenians’ tendency to be taken in by the orators’ fine words and his style is generally calm, measured, and never excessive, just like Pericles’ and other orators’, such as Diodotus, who is his direct adversary during that same assembly and eventually obtains that Mytilene is spared. All in all, we find no element here that contributes to outlining the character’s ethos and personality (see Nicolai 1998: 292-4). In the famous funeral oration for those who had fallen in the first year of the war (2.34-47), Pericles’ own language and style betray no individual peculiarity, but homogeneously conform to Thucydides’ usual language and style.

In the end, there is no doubt that direct speeches perform an *ideological* function in Thucydides too, as they did in Herodotus. This function especially emerges within the speeches that refer to crucial decision-making; they are normally placed at key points of the narration (for example, in view of forthcoming military conflicts) and also establish a connection among the diegetic segments. It is precisely there, in the passages in which mimesis prevails and the author ‘conceals’ his presence behind the characters, that concepts, hints, and interpretative categories depending on the author’s mind-set and vision of the world concentrate the most. Pericles’ aforementioned funeral oration (2.34-47) may be taken as a striking example of this function; the oration is an absolutely ideal representation of Athens’ political system, entirely based on paradigmatic and hypothetical rather than real premises, which the historian puts into the mouth of the leader of Athenian democracy.

Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides hardly ever calls into cause a supernaturally ordained plan (the will of the gods, fate, oracles); what actually counts is the individuals’ psyche, its rational and irrational aspects, together with the concepts of utility, safety, as well as power relationships and the rules of political life.<sup>28</sup> Direct speeches tend therefore to take on a strong paradigmatic value, becoming instruments of analysis of political events, which can be used to understand their import and consequence beyond the state of affairs and endowing them with a universal meaning. They enable the readers to appreciate the inner dynamics of political decisions by differ-

<sup>27</sup> See Ar. *Eq.* 40-72; Plut. *Nic.* 8.

<sup>28</sup> On the philosophical premises of Herodotus’ (pre-Socratic) and Thucydides’ (Sophistic) historical conception, see López Eire 1990.

entiating what is essential from what is purely incidental, playing a role which is somewhat similar to the tragic choral *stasima*. In other words, it is through the mimetic sections (*oratio recta*) that Thucydides conveys his own ideas on the premises of the Peloponnesian war, on the nature of the protagonists of political life, and on the different circumstances that progressively unfold in the various phases of the conflict.

A comparison between the two historiographers has foregrounded many analogies between the two writers, in the first place the idea that both of them do not reproduce actual speeches, but hypothetical (and more or less faithful to historical reality) reconstructions. Herodotus appropriates and employs this kind of reconstructive mode, which derives from epos, without questioning neither the problem of faithfulness and congruence, nor of verisimilitude. In fact, he has been criticized since ancient times for putting a praise of democratic isonomy in Persian general Otanes' mouth: it was something that sounded scarcely believable to have happened in Susa, years before democracy was established in Athens.<sup>29</sup> Thucydides achieved a higher degree of consideration and self-awareness as is evident in the programmatic and methodological chapter 22 in Book 1, in which he illustrates the criterion he has followed to arrange the different speeches. He has inevitably given up literal exactness and has clung to what, according to him, was their "general sense" (ξυμπάση γνώμη) and overall logic.<sup>30</sup> This is a fundamental passage in that it reveals that Thucydides was conscious that he had to follow a criterion of verisimilitude (and therefore ad-

<sup>29</sup> This criticism is echoed in Book 6 (43.3): "When Mardonius arrived in Ionia in his voyage along the coast of Asia, he did a thing which I here set down for the wonder (μέγιστον θῶμα) of those Greeks who will not believe Otanes to have declared his opinion among the Seven that democracy was best for Persia". On this issue, see Lanza 1977: 225-32.

<sup>30</sup> Here is the complete passage concerning the construction of the speeches (1.22.1): "With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said" (καὶ ὅσα μὲν λόγῳ εἶπον ἕκαστοι ἢ μέλλοντες πολεμήσειν ἢ ἐν αὐτῷ ἤδη ὄντες, χαλεπὸν τὴν ἀκρίβειαν αὐτῆν τῶν λεχθέντων διαμνημονεῦσαι ἦν ἐμοί τε ὢν αὐτὸς ἤκουσα καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοθὲν ποθεν ἐμοὶ ἀπαγγέλλουσιν· ὡς δ' ἂν ἐδόκουν ἐμοὶ ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστ' εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένῳ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων, οὕτως εἴρηται). In order to reproduce the overall line of reasoning of each speech, Thucydides must have critically verified all possible testimonies, personal memories, evidences, chronicles, etc.; it is ultimately the same procedure he adopted in order to reconstruct the facts. On the meaning of ξυμπάση γνώμη, see Porciani 1999.

here to a poietic 'mode') in order to present his readers with the illustration of political paradigmatic cases. Hence, he is perfectly aware that, in the mimetic sections, scientific accuracy coexists with a fictional and creative component, while the question of which has the upper hand remains open for debate. However, this is a false problem if one considers the interaction between the diegetic and the mimetic dimensions (see Morrison 2006), since, when located within diegesis, theoretically reconstructed verisimilar speeches grow 'authentic' in their own right, thus becoming an essential component of the narration.<sup>31</sup> Their importance does not proceed from their being historically valid (since they do not contain the orators' very words), but from their having an exegetic function. In a sense, the mimetic sections, the direct speeches in which the authorial voice hides behind the characters have no ancillary or subsidiary function with regard to diegesis, but rather direct and substantiate the narration itself by interpreting and illuminating the events of the historical narrative. When he adopts the theatrical mimetic mode (that is, an alternation of speeches and an extreme reduction of dialogue tags), the historiographer becomes a poet-playwright, as it were, in that he introduces segments of pure fiction, dominated by the rules of probability and verisimilitude which, according to Aristotle, characterized poetry as opposed to historiography (*Poet.* 1451a36-1452a11). Not only does such swerve of the narrative modality strengthen the dramatizing effect, but it also corroborates the ideological import the author wishes to convey. The case of the Melian dialogue in Book 5 is a case in point and deserves to be specifically addressed here.

## 6. A Case of Total Mimesis: the 'Tragic' Melian Dialogue

One particular section of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* takes on an emblematic value with regard to the relationship between diegesis and mimesis. It is the famous Melian dialogue in Book 5 (85-113), which the 'author-director' placed at a strategic narrative crossroads, as it represents Athens' last show of power before the Sicilian catastrophe. Thucydides tells us how the citizens of Melos, a Spartan colony, had no intention of joining the Delian league and declared themselves neutral. After repelling the first Athenian attempt to subdue them, the Melians had openly

<sup>31</sup> We should note that Thucydides carries out a selection of the speeches actually delivered during the meetings and assemblies of which he writes. Not only is he sparing of information about the details and the context of these gatherings, but he also makes a careful selection by focussing on single orations, which must have had an exemplary value, and completely ignoring the other orators, not even mentioning their names. See on this Canfora 1972: 32-7.

gone to war against Athens (5.84.2) and, Thucydides adds, before attacking the Melians, the two Athenian *strategoi*, Cleomedes and Tisias, sent a delegation to parley with the island's oligarchic authorities (5.84.3). This initiates a long dialogic confrontation divided into two sections, that is, two distinct dialogues; the first, composed of twenty-seven cues (5.85-111), is much longer than the second, which consists in a mere exchange of conclusive statements between the two parts (5.112-13). The two sections are interrupted by a pause during which the Athenians leave the encounter's venue in order for the Melians to deliberate privately.

As an ancient scholium put it, “[r]ather than a speech . . . he dared compose a dialogue” (ἀντὶ γὰρ δημηγορίας διάλογόν τινα . . . ἐτόλμησε συσθεῖναι);<sup>32</sup> the scholiast – who probably echoed a critical tradition unfavourable to Thucydides’ choice – emphasized a crucial point here. Mimesis becomes a privileged and exclusive expressive tool as never before in fifth-century historiography. Not only is this dialogue extremely long (a feature we should not underestimate in any case), but it also and especially displays a few formal elements that make it unique. Thucydides adopts an intricate dialogic structure, decidedly different from the usual one; its specificity consists in the almost total absence of diegetic elements in order to give way to mimesis through direct speeches. As was customary on the stage and unlike Herodotus’ but also Thucydides’ own practice, no introductory formula precedes the interventions. Only the first two cues of the first and the second dialogue are introduced by preliminary statements, such as “the Athenian envoys spoke as follows” and “[t]he Melian commissioners answered”.<sup>33</sup> The other twenty-five speeches follow one another, alternating theses and antitheses as in a rhetorical or dramatic agon with no interruption on the narrator’s part. The Melians expound their arguments which the Athenians contradict point by point; occasionally the rhythm of this ‘cut and riposte performance’ is so pressing that the dialogue takes on the pace of a tragic *stichomythia*. Thucydides is unquestionably aware of the mimetic and theatrical organization of the dialogue to the extent that he makes the Athenians suggest to adopt a dialectic procedure right from the start and their interlocutors willingly accept the proposal: “Make no set speech yourselves, but take us up at whatever you do not like, and settle that before going any farther”.<sup>34</sup>

Ancient literary critics had not disregarded the peculiarity of this mimetic pattern embedded in a diegetic context as we gather from a com-

<sup>32</sup> See on this Hude 1927: 318, 24-6.

<sup>33</sup> οἱ δὲ τῶν Ἀθηναίων πρέσβεις ἔλεγον τοιάδε, 5.85; οἱ δὲ τῶν Μηλιῶν ξυνηδρῶν ἀπεκρίναντο, 5.86.

<sup>34</sup> καθ’ ἕκαστον γὰρ καὶ μηδ’ ὑμεῖς ἐνὶ λόγῳ, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ μὴ δοκοῦν ἐπιτηδείως λέγεσθαι εὐθὺς ὑπολαμβάνοντες κρίνετε, 5.85.



ment by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *On Thucydides* (first century BC). In general, Dionysius was scarcely appreciative of this dialogue exactly because, among other reasons, he saw its form as excessively dramatized. At a certain point, he claimed that Thucydides employs “the diegetic arrangement” (τοῦτο τὸ σχῆμα . . . τὸ διηγηματικόν) only in one case, while in the rest of the dialogue “he resorts to the presence of the characters and makes it dramatic” (προσωποποιεῖ τὸν μετὰ ταῦτα διάλογον καὶ δραματίζει).<sup>35</sup> Dionysius’ lexical choices, with special regard to the verb δραματίζειν (‘to dramatize’) and προσωποποιεῖν, that is, resorting to πρόσωπα (‘characters’), definitely allude to the world of theatre, drama, and performance. Indeed, thanks to its extreme mimetic mode, which has no precedents in historiographical writing before Thucydides and, as far as I can tell, has never been used again since then, the Melian dialogue gives the impression of having been conceived for the stage. The abbreviations for “Athenians” and “Melians”, which we still find in modern editions, were subsequently added in order to partition the different cues, according to a customary mechanism that set in when the readerly consumption of these texts became well-established.<sup>36</sup>

The eccentric features of this dialogue are so clearly atypical that Thucydidean scholars have in turn hypothesized that it could originally constitute a separate work, a single dialogue similar to the contemporary Sophistic ones that Thucydides, or perhaps others, later appended to the *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>37</sup> Following the same line of reasoning, it has been conjectured that the Melian dialogue could be a piece of propaganda meant for oral delivery within some oligarchic Hetairia.<sup>38</sup> There is no space here to discuss issues of authenticity with regard to this text, yet it seems to me reasonable enough to assume that Thucydides consciously chose an ex-

<sup>35</sup> Radermacher and Usener 1899: 325-418 (*De Thucydide*, 37-41).

<sup>36</sup> See on this Canfora 1992: 14. In one of the most ancient testimonies (Heidelberg library, Palatinus Graecus 252), the text presents no subdivision or signs allowing us to distinguish the dialogue’s cues, while others (for instance, the Laurentian 69, 2, coeval with the Palatinus, and the Vatican Gr. 126) include a series of abbreviations in the margin that help us decipher the organization of the dialogue. The inhomogeneous attribution of the lines in Byzantine manuscripts shows the same hesitations which one may also find in the manuscript tradition of the playwrights.

<sup>37</sup> Relying on Georg Grote’s hypothesis, Georg Busolt defined the Melian dialogue “a fragment of a *Melou Alosis*” (1904: 674); see also Beloch 1916: 14. Henry Dickinson Westlake considers it “a separate minor work” (1968: 317n1). See also Canfora 1971: 409ff., 2011: 166ff., and Neri 2004: 78n6. It has even been suggested that one may identify peculiar linguistic and stylistic features that would characterize the Melian and the Athenian rhetorical stances (see Redondo 1999).

<sup>38</sup> See on this Schmid 1948: 177n3; Canfora 1979: 32ff.

perimental form, which he may have derived from tragic theatre, in order to relate in a particularly dramatic way an event which, according to him, should be endowed with a distinctive symbolic and paradigmatic meaning. In fifth-century Athens tragic theatre must have been perceived as the dominant artistic form, one that could most efficaciously educate a large audience; and it was perhaps for this reason that Thucydides felt the need to employ, at crucial moments of his narration, patterns drawn from stage performance.

In this “splendid example of dramaturgy of power”<sup>39</sup> (Paduano 1991: 2.1463), Thucydides chooses a specific and concrete example – the great Athenian power subjugating a small neutral community – in order to make room for wider historical and political considerations and to reflect upon the dynamics of power relationships as well as on the natural tendency of the strong to prevail over the weak. However, if we read the Melian dialogue in the light of Athens’ subsequent Sicilian expedition and its disastrous outcome, we can appreciate the strikingly tragic paradigm of the events that saw the Athenians precipitate from the peak of their power to the misery of defeat (see Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 2.2.3). In the dialogue, they censure their interlocutors’ poor rationality and incapacity of drawing up a realistic account of the forces at play, and yet, in the Sicilian military venture, they will make the same mistakes, which will eventually cost them a very great deal. The ‘tragic’ core of these events may therefore have led the historian to employ extreme (theatrical) mimesis as the most suitable form for his narration.

*English translation by Lisanna Calvi*

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<sup>39</sup> “[S]plendido esempio di dramaturgia del potere”.

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