Book Reviews

Geoffrey Hawthorn


Geoffrey Hawthorn, the distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Politics at Cambridge and friend and editor of the late Bernard Williams, died in January at the age of 74. In this final book published during his lifetime, he offers the fruits of his decades of engagement with Thucydides. Whatever else one may think about Thucydides’ work, Hawthorn says, ‘Its subject is clear’. ‘It is politics, men (all men) seeking power over others, using it to pursue ends that are sometimes clear, sometimes not, never being sure what the outcomes will be’ (p. ix). Updating Hobbes’s praise of Thucydides as the ‘most politic historian that ever writ’, Hawthorn credits him with ‘presenting politics as they were practiced, neither writing beyond what his subjects could see or drawing readers into conspiracies of hindsight’ (*ibid.*). For this and other reasons Hawthorn casts Thucydides as ‘an unsurpassed guide to a deeper realism about politics’ (publisher’s summary). As will appear, one of my problems with the book is that I am too much in agreement with it (or vice versa).

Hawthorn, who was reputed an excellent teacher, suggests that his book as intended for (among others) undergraduates (p. xi). It’s not then surprising that it should so resemble a course. Rather than proceed thematically, mustering at each stage of the argument evidence drawn from throughout Thucydides, he marches through the work sequentially as if covering it as a series of assigned readings. He proceeds by means of detailed summaries of the events of Thucydides’ narrative: apart from a brief preface, an introductory chapter entitled ‘The text’, and a conclusion of nine pages, these comprise the entire book.

The worse the reader knows Thucydides, the more he may welcome these summaries as necessary, and the better he knows him, the more he may regret
them as superfluous. It is always a thankless task to recite the events of any masterpiece of narrative, and the more detailed the recitation, the more thankless it becomes.

Hawthorn counteracts this tendency toward tedium by sprinkling his summaries with brief remarks on both the events thus re-recounted and on Thucydides’ handling of them. These are often provocative, and one can only regret that they rarely receive elaboration, but remain on the level of dicta. Very occasionally Hawthorn steps back and renders a somewhat longer judgment, as on the role of Pericles in the work (pp. 58-60, 65-7), Thucydides’ passage on *stasis* (pp. 96-101), and his understanding of the emotions (pp. 148-150) (this last inspired by Williams). Only somewhat longer, however. Like his still briefer comments these fall among the most arresting passages in the book, yet here too one may regret that they still fall so far short of the treatments their subjects deserve.

There is the further complication that Hawthorn’s accounts of the events described in Thucydides include a large (and not always clearly identified) non-Thucydidean component. It therefore often seems that he is partly summarizing Thucydides and partly rivaling him (by offering an account more complete than his), this at some cost to the clarity of the text. ‘Thucydides does not explain’ (p. 32). ‘Thucydides does not enlighten us’ (p. 33). Hawthorn does his best to supply these supposed deficiencies. Is he interpreting Thucydides or is he (after the manner of our ancient historians) rewriting his history for him? It appears that he tries to do both, which unfortunately leaves him insufficient room for either.

These are problems throughout the work, which nowhere loom larger than in Hawthorn’s treatment of Book One (pp. 19-50). There his complex (and admirably rich) account of the background to the war culminates in the bold assertion that ‘it is clear from what Thucydides writes that it was the cumulative effect of what the Spartans heard [at the First Lacedaemonian Conference], not any other kind of ‘thing done’, that gave [them] what was to them a ‘true reason’ to act’ (p. 39). Is ‘it is clear from what Thucydides writes’ to be taken as Hawthorn’s interpretation of Thucydides’ own position, or as Hawthorn’s improvement on Thucydides on the basis of the Thucydidean evidence (as augmented from other sources)? Certainly Hawthorn’s claim seems to fly in the face of Thucydides’ own statement at 1.88 as to why the Spartans decided as they did, nor does Hawthorn’s elaboration of that claim suffice to meet this difficulty. No doubt he is right to argue against a mechanistic interpretation of the compulsion (*anankê*) under which Thucydides declares Sparta to have acted (1.23.6), and to stress the importance of the Spartans’ conception of