HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Thucydides (460 B.C.-395 B.C.)

Who was Thucydides? This observer of the grandeur and fall of the Athenians, during the second half of the fifth century, served as a general in the north of Greece, but apart from that evidence of his personal experience is known almost solely for one book, his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In that great work—some would say it, not Herodotus' *History*, was the first true History--Thucydides proved himself a drier, more analytical, more philosophical historian than his predecessor and model, Herodotus. Thucydides probes the causes and resolutions that created the Peloponnesian War—up to the year 411 B.C.-- in the last thirty years of the fifth century. He writes his history largely by means of constructed (remembered, reported) speeches, by a careful sifting of evidence—in conscious difference from Herodotus, who, as we have seen, was often considered the 'father of lies'—and by sticking closely to his topic, unlike Herodotus, who was the master of the digression which fitted into his plan. And Thucydides develops a narrative style, as well as a view of mankind, which makes him a true cross between the epic creator and a seasoned and relatively pessimistic judge of human affairs.

How does Thucydides establish a history? Thucydides creates his history out of defined vignettes in which events of the Peloponnesian war are converted into cameos, usually with little, or very spare, commentary from the author. (As a participant general in the army of Athens, Thucydides sticks to the detail of military affairs, and—in this like Herodotus, too—makes almost no reference to himself, with the exception of a famed reference, in the third person, to a certain Thucydides who 'fought in the north.')

For the whole earth is the tomb of famous men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men. Make them your examples, and, esteeming courage to be freedom and freedom to be happiness, do not weigh too nicely the perils of war. Funeral Oration of Pericles.

The Melian debate; The Funderal Oration of Pericles. Thucydides was a master of reported speech. After the debacle of the Sicilian Expedition, in 415 B.C., the Athenians decided to add to their Aegean possessions, and proposed a takeover of the small island of Melos, which had so far maintained a neutral posture in the Peloponnesian War, despite historical ties to Sparta. It will be worth your while to examine Thucydides' account of the debate between the Athenian envoys to the Melians, and the leading Melians who are chosen to discuss the Athenian proposals.The dry reliance on force, which the Athenian representative displays, is 'brilliant':

Melian: *'But must we be your enemies? Would you not receive us as friends if we are neutral and remain at peace with you?'*

Athenian: 'No, your enmity does not injure us as much as your friendship; for your enmity is in the eyes of our subjects a demonstration of our power, your friendship of our weakness.'

Never has *Machtpolitik* been so simply and clearly dissected. And so goes the description of the Melian episode, the interlocutors reduced to namelessness by Thucydides, and the ruthless determination of the Athenians screwed tighter and tighter, but in the coldest

possible language of diplomacy. It is no wonder that many 'modern historians' have turned back to Homer, for the model of the Thucydidean historian: as you will have seen, the *Iliad* is full of formally expressive delegations, carefully crafted hard-talk, and brutal resolutions. It hardly needs to be said that, at the end of the Melian debate, the Melian males were slaughtered and the women and children sold into slavery.

The Funeral Oration of Pericles. It being the custom in Athens that the elected leader of the Athenians should provide an oration for the military dead, each year, Pericles undertook this challenge after the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). At that time Athens seemed manifestly in control of military affairs in Greece; the Long Walls were strong protection against invasion, trade was vigorous, culture was at its peak. You will want to contrast the tone of Pericles—as Thucydides recreates it—with the tone of the Athenian representative at Melos; cold, logical, crushing. The mastery of such tone differences is the mark of Thucydides' brilliant inner ear for the sounds of history, and the true indicator of his allegiance to the tradition of epic narrative in Greece.