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Historians of Their Own Times

Jonathan Marwil



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1. Related by Henry Kissinger in his *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. xxii.

The urge to tell stories from our lives is compelling. These stories usually derive from a personal moment such as a meeting, a competition, a love affair, or a death. The possible topics are as variable as our experiences, and so too the tone of our recitations, involving every permutation of the comic or tragic. Indeed, without such stories discourse would wither, for they tap our richest lode of knowledge.

Some of us have stories with themes and settings of a decidedly public nature. We may have witnessed an event with obvious historical importance, or we may have known a celebrity well enough to relate significant conversations or anecdotes. Whatever the case, we tend to tell our stories often, and over the years we manage to polish their form and highlight our role, whether as actor or merely witness. Dean Acheson once said he never read a report of a conversation in which the author came out second best.¹

Few of us, however, ever think to write our stories down except in letters or diaries. Even when we have been connected with an important event or person we generally confine ourselves to oral reporting. We doubt the historical value of our observations; we distrust our capacity to tell the story well; we hesitate before presuming to sound self-important; we are too busy with our daily lives. But if as actors or witnesses we confront the manifestly extraordinary, doubts about our ability or value as a reporter are apt to dissolve, and some more formal mode of discourse may seem desirable, even imperative. This summons to literature is distinctly heard in the voice of a young Chinese interviewed in the early 1960s:

I am trying to learn to write. I have been thinking of becoming a writer ever since 1954. First, I sent in various things to the local newspapers here in Yen-an. Then, after 1958, I began wondering how one could ever describe all that had been happening. I know,

*of course, that such a lot has happened in the country in the last few years. But it is very difficult to describe it. I would like to write about how I have experienced it.*²

In giving ourselves over to chronicling significant memories, we share in the impulse that has inspired much of Western history writing since the Greeks. History as we know it began with the urge to record contemporaneous *res gestae*, especially war; it sprang from a compelling sense that what had been experienced had to be saved. Choosing to make an inquiry into the present (generously defined), the historian (the inquirer) compiled his story primarily from what he had seen himself or heard from others. More distant times might be invoked or summarized to give intelligibility, but the historian's subject was the climactic experience of his own time. The past beyond the memory of living men was unreachable and unusable and so did not need to be discovered. Herodotus ranged widely, but his efforts were focused by a conflict still reverberating in his youth.

Right through the Renaissance the historian of his own time remained the historian *par excellence*, just as war, diplomacy, and political intrigue remained the traditional subjects of historical inquiry. The individual who wrote as an eyewitness was widely assumed to be "the most informative" and "most highly prized by the judicious."³ Those words belong to Thomas Fuller, a seventeenth-century author of several histories, but they could as well be found in a dozen of his contemporaries. Fuller also valued other forms of history, and as the author of *The Church History of Britain* he relied on books compiled or composed by men, like himself, remote in time and place from what they described. But only in the eighteenth century would history as a primarily retrospective art, written entirely from paper, earn a standing comparable to the firsthand account. And in the past century or so, since becoming a professional, the historian has usually been as far removed from the closets of power and the fields of battle as from the presumption that the articles and books he writes will teach his readers valuable lessons. We have expanded our appreciation of what history writing ought to include and our awareness of the resources for doing it. The results have been impressive, though they have made some historians uneasy. Yosef Yerushalmi recently wrote of his qualms in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*:

*I am . . . convinced that a historiography that does not aspire to be memorable is in peril of becoming a rampant growth. As the flood of monographs and books crosses my desk each year, I often wonder why a scholar chose this particular topic when, with the same linguistic and methodological equipment, he could have chosen another. Each time I hear that a young and promising scholar has not "published enough," something within me protests. The enterprise has become self-generating, the quest—Faustian.*⁴

But in the midst of the plenitude and sophistication of modern historiography, the ancient mode persists. Not only does it persist, but it thrives as arguably the richest, certainly the most popular, and perhaps the most complex of all the modes. It is also the least studied. To be sure, many authors of contemporary histories have been the subjects of books and articles, and a few, like Thucydides,

2. Quoted in Jan Myrdal, *Report from a Chinese Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), pp. 177-78.

3. Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain*, ed. J. Nichols (London: T. Tegg and Son, 1837), 3:160.

4. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), pp. 101-2.

have been the objects of exhaustive study. But scarce are the discussions that try to sort out the concerns and strategies involved in writing the story of one's own time, that assume that Xenophon and Norman Mailer have much in common with each other and with a host of intervening individuals who felt themselves to be living through extraordinary occasions and tried to make sense of them. The scholarship of historiography has other concerns, primarily with tracing (and justifying) the evolution of our way of writing history; while the burgeoning critical interest in the diary and autobiography as literary forms has not generally engaged works of history. What makes this neglect all the more surprising is that many of the greatest historical works—some, I suspect, that Yerushalmi would call "memorable"—fall into this type, and that the twentieth century, an era of unparalleled political turbulence and endemic war, has generated a flood of personal histories.

The impulse to record one's own time has realized itself in many forms. Thucydides wrote a history of a great war; Geoffrey Villehardouin, a memoir of a great expedition; Milovan Djilas, an autobiography of a revolution within a war; and Pepys, a diary of a great city in a revived polity as well as of a delightful private (and public) figure. We might also include novels that have been deliberate, careful chronicles of their times, like Richard Hughes's *The Fox in the Attic*. "I am writing a historical novel of my own period," Hughes said in 1969, "and I am trying to pursue two kinds of truth at the same time—the truth of fiction and historical truth, but I am not allowing myself the license of altering the historical truth."⁵ And we could extend our search to poetry as well, particularly the ballad and epic. What we are dealing with, in brief, is a rogue phenomenon that tramples through traditional genre categories and thus requires more imaginative handling by critics. Following E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, we can suppose that if the writers hitherto named were all to meet around a table they would recognize a deep commonality of inspiration, intention, and effort, however disparate their narrative structures. After all, each man witnessed momentous times; each felt impelled to make a record of them; each sought out the truth as best he could; and each realized that he was making sense of his own personal situation—whether or not he projected himself into his story—by his creative act. Of course most novels, most diaries, and many autobiographies are not contemporary histories, for they do not mean to take account of the world outside their authors' mind and movements. Nor should we include much of what we designate as journalism, for while the journalist is usually an eyewitness to what he reports, the very fact that he must write virtually *as* he sees—in medias res—gives another shape to his work. His perspective and his purpose necessarily lack a wholeness of vision.

5. *The New Yorker*, 28 June 1969,
p. 31.

What are some of the characteristics of contemporary history writing? To begin with, these books usually arise from upheavals such as war and revolution, events that disrupt society and confuse our lives, and that therefore need to be described, explained, justified, somehow made intelligible. To the prospective reporter's eye they are extraordinary, unparalleled. Here is Thucydides opening his *History*:

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war waged by the Peloponnesians and the Athenians against one another. He

*began the task at the very outset of the war, in the belief that it would be great and noteworthy above all the wars that had gone before, inferring this from the fact that both powers were then at their best in preparedness for war in every way, and seeing the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides with one state or the other, some at once, others planning to do so. For this was the greatest movement that had ever stirred the Hellenes, extending also to some of the Barbarians, one might say even to a very large part of mankind. Indeed, as to the events of the period just preceding this, and those of a still earlier date, it was impossible to get clear information on account of lapse of time; but from evidence which, on pushing my inquiries to the furthest point, I find that I can trust, I think that they were not really great either as regards the wars then waged or in other particulars.*⁶

6. *History*, Loeb Classical Library, 1:1.

Five hundred years later Josephus claimed priority for another war.

*The war of the Jews against the Romans—the greatest not only of the wars of our own time, but, so far as accounts have reached us, well nigh of all that ever broke out between cities or nations—has not lacked its historians.*⁷

7. *The Jewish War*, Loeb Classical Library, 1:1.

And fifteen hundred years later, in the inaugurating sentence of his *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, the Earl of Clarendon struck a similar tone:

*That posterity may not be deceived, by the prosperous wickedness of these times, into an opinion that less than a general combination, and universal apostasy in the whole nation from their religion and allegiance, could, in so short a time, have produced such a total and prodigious alteration and confusion over the whole kingdom; and so the memory of those few who, out of duty and conscience, have opposed and resisted that torrent which hath overwhelmed them may lose the recompense due to their virtue, and, having undergone the injuries and reproaches of this, may not find a vindication in a better age; it will not be unuseful, (at least to the curiosity if not the conscience of men,) to present to the world a full and clear narration of the grounds, circumstances, and artifices of this Rebellion, not only from the time since the flame hath been visible in a civil war, but, looking farther back, from those former passages, accidents, and actions, by which the seed-plots were made and framed from whence these mischiefs have successively grown to the height they are now at.*⁸

8. Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 1:1.

Our developed sense of perspective must not interfere with our appreciating these claims. Each author is obviously caught up in the momentum and uniqueness of what he has seen. If he were not, he would hardly have taken up his pen; he feels he has been chosen by his subject. Certainly he does not suspect that he is exaggerating. What has been seen has never been seen before, or at least there is no reason or record to make him think so. But even with greater knowledge these writers would still reach for superlatives, for as with most men they instinctively imagine that what has happened in their presence supersedes in importance like events heard of happening to others. Their hyperbole also expresses a fundamental frustration with language, a sense of its inadequacy in the circumstances. Moreover, the charged tone of these narratives can also bear witness to the special circumstances of their composition. Thucydides and Clarendon were both in exile when they

wrote, perhaps not lacking in creature comforts but highly agitated in their minds. So too was Milovan Djilas when he wrote *Wartime*, although his exile consisted of being forbidden to leave his homeland. The pain and importance of writing one's own story are lucidly expressed in the opening of what will be a classic:

*I sensed, I knew the pain and suffering this account would bring, so I kept putting it off, secretly hoping that I would not have to write it. But this too has become a duty—one which seems to me today to be even greater and more significant than my participation in the revolutionary war. That experience was life itself—an unusual life, with death and in death—while this is giving an account of that life, of oneself, and of events which were historic even as they were happening, since they altered the existence, the consciousness, and the destiny of the persons and nations drawn into their vortex.*⁹

9. Milovan Djilas, *Wartime* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), p. 3.

The historian of events remote in time from himself, however mighty his subject, will incline toward the relaxed tone of the library.

*In the second century of the christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient reknown and disciplined valor. The gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury.*¹⁰

10. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1815), 1:1.

UNlike Gibbon, the authors of contemporary histories are often well versed in politics or war. They have had more worldly experience than a stint in Parliament and service with a county militia, helpful as those were to the historian of the Roman Empire. They may, like Churchill, have led a nation; like Trotsky, a revolution; or like T. E. Lawrence, a revolt. Or they may have been men of counsel and affairs, like Albert Speer, who served a dictator; like Clarendon, who handled business for two kings; or like Guicciardini, who advised three popes. As history was for so long preeminently the story of contemporaneous great events, those who had made the decisions and led the armies were reasoned to be its most suitable chroniclers. Lesser men, though, have also itched to tell what they saw, like Pepys, a young man just starting to make his way in the world, who, realizing the significance of the impending Restoration, began to record his activities; and like William of Malmesbury, a "closet penman" but a monk who had access to individuals who could inform his *New History*, presumably the same people who he says "rightly blame our predecessors, who since Bede have left no record of themselves and their doings."¹¹ Yet contemporary historians have, for the most part, been men of action, or men who deliberately injected themselves into the action, like John Reed or George Orwell. Some are already shaping the story they will tell even as they experience events; others do not begin writing until years later, when age, illness, or exile gives them the opportunity.

They wrote with what sometimes seems to be an astonishing memory for the facts, so full and precise that we grow skeptical, knowing how memory processes information. But more often than not contemporary historians have had the accuracy of their narratives upheld. This is in part because the shape of their story had taken form even as it occurred,

11. *Historia Novella*, ed. K. R. Potter (London: Nelson, 1955), p. 46.

in part because their texts grew out of their own notes and papers, in part because they had access to the principals involved, and in part because the events themselves had a memory-expanding impact. Do not most of us have a clear memory of the details of significant days in our lives, be they private (the death of a parent) or public (the assassination of John F. Kennedy)? Moreover, psychiatrists tell us that the perpetrators of crimes and brutalities, no less than their victims, have hypermnesia, that is, an overly sharp and direct recall of painful—physical or psychological—experience. The Holocaust survivors, with their relentless memories, have made us aware of this condition, the opposite of amnesia. Since suffering, imposed or experienced, is the leitmotif of so many contemporary histories, we should perhaps be less skeptical of prodigious memories. And we should never forget how much better developed were the memories of our ancestors.

The style of some of our historians, like their memories, may also evoke wonder. We expected the rounded sentences and rolling rhythms of Churchill's World War II volumes, but who among his contemporaries would have imagined that Ulysses Grant had such a memoir in him, or who among the contemporaries of the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo, or the crusader Villehardouin? The readability of these lively works is easily explained. In the throes of obligatory discourse, when what wants to be said is very well known and very necessary to say, one often finds an eloquence otherwise denied. In the passion to set down on paper clearly and accurately what they remembered, what were very likely the crucial experiences of their lives, our authors lived up to the Hemingway ideal of good writing. Great events not only find their historians but often supply them with a voice as well.

They also induce a heightened self-consciousness. Many contemporary historians, speaking formally as witnesses to their own time, like Thucydides, seldom intrude into their text. Many more choose to witness their own selves in time. Their books are a record not only of great events, but also of how those events have touched their lives. Hence the difficulty in determining whether particular books are not really works of autobiography pure and simple. Often the reader's confusion echoes the indecision of the author himself. The Earl of Clarendon, for example, began writing a history, then put it away; years later he decided to write an autobiography. Ultimately, he stitched the two together to make the book we read today. Clarendon's dilemma is perhaps symptomatic, especially of men wishing to describe revolutionary times: How is one best to convey what it has meant and what it has felt like to have one's world shift its center? The shock and drama of war may equal that of revolution, but war at least offers the illusion of closure and of a familiar life waiting to be taken up again. Some of our authors resolved the dilemma of format by writing both kinds of books separately. Trotsky wrote *My Life* as well as *A History of the Russian Revolution*; Gilbert Burnet wrote *History of His Own Time* and began a life of himself. Among those who consciously melded the two genres we have the brilliant, some might argue pathological, example of T. E. Lawrence. There is no point in trying to decide whether *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is autobiography or history. It is self-consciously both and more, an extraordinary testament of one man's confrontation with himself as actor and spectator in history.

But did Lawrence tell the truth, about either events or himself? The question asked of this particular hero is one asked regularly of contemporary historians as a group. Are their tales not necessarily riddled with error, bias, polemic, and self-justification? Should even the calm, measured Tocqueville be trusted? Certainly scholars today—with the exception of ancient historians, who must lean heavily on their narrative sources—approach them cautiously, perhaps too cautiously. They are scanned as ticklish sources of information, much as we might read any other contemporaneously produced document, rather than as unique interpretive schema by which we ought to inform and ultimately test our judgments. In our own books we tend to use their views and phrasings for color and to discard their explanations. Consider the opinion in the preface to Mark Kishlansky's *The Rise of the New Model Army*:

I have made sparing use of Clarendon, Whitelock, Ludlow, Holles, Hutchinson and other memorialists who, though participants in the events they describe, wrote their recollections through the distorting glass of hindsight. This is a most complicated problem, for some, like Clarendon and Whitelock, relied upon notes made at the time or on collections of newsbooks. Nevertheless, all these authors assess the causes of events by their consequences, hopelessly muddling their unfolding. In these accounts men who benefit from developments are accused of plotting them, a determinism one would hardly expect from such a "providential" generation.¹²

12. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. ix.

That sounds like a reasonable, sober procedure until one asks whether the standard suggested for historical reconstruction would not condemn virtually every historian. Who among us has not assessed the causes of events by their consequences, or, with adequate reason, imagined that those who benefited from events may well have arranged them? Kishlansky is not alone in his readiness to undervalue the usefulness of contemporary analyses, and this readiness—reinforced by our situation-focused questions and values—can be as wasteful as it is arrogant. Understanding requires that we respect what contemporaries say, however impatient we may be with them. Consider the case of Clarendon.

Some of Clarendon's facts are wrong, and some of his assessments of character, motive, and cause are easily disputed. But no one who wishes to understand the English Revolution should fail to read him closely and often. Not because his particular principles were the right ones but because in the nature of his explanatory focus and passion he leads us past the facts and the numbers into the very mind-set and logic—the mentality—of his time and place. For example, in the tortuously long opening sentence quoted earlier, he speaks of the "universal apostasy" of the nation. For us the word "apostasy" registers as a metaphor and we are apt to imagine that it was so employed by Clarendon. But that is far from the case. Clarendon was using it in its primary sense, for in his milieu politics were still thought and talked about as if the world was quite literally God's kingdom, the actions of men were still assumed to be God's concern, and the slipping and sliding of consciences were still felt to have profound public implications. Of course we all admit that religious values and habits were important in the seventeenth century, but do we really fathom how on both sides there were

men who spoke and behaved as if they were living within the Scriptures they knew so well, and that their interpretations of events necessarily drew as much on those texts as on the events themselves? Perhaps even more important, can we understand how their actions during those events might have been influenced, even predetermined, by the roles they thought the Scriptures assigned them? When, for example, we hear talk about the "New Jerusalem" as both an obligatory and rapturous possibility, we comprehend the demands and can trace the metaphor, but are we alive to the passion and do we measure properly the control that vision had over action and interpretation? If we wish to understand why toppling a king in the seventeenth century was a decidedly more revolutionary act than toppling one in the eighteenth, we can ill afford to make only "sparing use" of Clarendon and the other memorialists of his age. They can provide worthy explanations as well as crucial insights if we heed their discourse. The point may be obvious but needs reiterating, especially as we tend to imagine that our categories of explanation, our kinds of evidence, and our means of measuring that evidence have a special truth value. We may cross-examine a witness, we may doubt him, we may even decide he is a liar or a fool, but as Walter Laqueur reminds us in a review of Richard Hamilton's *Who Voted For Hitler*, we must first listen to the witness without condescension.

*He [Hamilton] then takes issue with observers of the German scene in the 1920's and 1930's, such as Konrad Heiden, who ("without any supporting data") called the Nazi Party a movement of the young. I would not write off Heiden and his contemporaries that easily. Heiden wrote one of the earliest and best biographies of Hitler and a number of other fine books on the Nazi period. It is true that he was not a sociologist, only a shrewd observer who went to countless mass meetings and, generally speaking, observed the rise of Hitler close up. I am willing to trust him at least as much as I trust a social scientist, writing 50 years after the event, who skillfully uses sophisticated techniques but has only partly reliable data at his disposal and whose knowledge of things German, though impressive, is not comparable to that of Heiden and his contemporaries.*¹³

13. *The New York Times Book Review*, 20 June 1982, p. 12.

Thus, in developing and disciplining our understanding of the events and people they write about, contemporary historians can protect us against that chronic disease—anachronism. Immunity is never conferred, but deep and scrupulous familiarity with contemporary narratives provides the best prophylactic. For because they offer an interpretation of an event, not just the constituent evidences of it, we have to engage their testimonies with an increased sensitivity to the conditions and attitudes they describe. Their texts, because they hope to convey what was felt or assumed by contemporaries, bid us to try harder to understand; simultaneously, they offer more convincing demonstrations of what and how contemporaries actually thought. We may, for example, read Pope Urban II's sermon preaching the crusade and yet suspect—given our predilections—that it is only a speech, and that both pope and crusaders had their own quite self-interested and secular reasons for desiring a crusade. But after we have read an author like Villehardouin we are much less apt to translate our motives into the situation. For both the things he says and the things he does not say,

he is a powerfully persuasive spokesman for an alien experience.

Another characteristic of contemporary historians is their belief that their inquiries can be useful, that the history they report has a value beyond pleasure. In this, of course, they do not differ from other historians, who also insist or merely expect that their audiences can gain valuable insights or lessons if they pay attention. But if the pedagogical intent is the same, there is likely to be a greater fervor, as well as at least the illusion of greater reliability, in the work of an eyewitness. We implicitly trust the eyewitness more than the person who has a story secondhand, however often we find our trust misplaced; and the individual who would go to the effort of writing his story has evidently a substantial commitment to being heard. This commitment is especially felt when the lessons to be taught come, as they frequently do, in the form of a warning. Long before the philosopher Santayana found his pithy, doom-laden way of telling us that the past must not be ignored, eyewitnesses of crimes, follies, and tragedies all but begged us to realize that it would be less hurtful, as Polybius advised, to learn through the mistakes of others than through our own. One of the most moving of such statements is found in the conclusion of Burnet's *History*:

I have now set out the state of affairs for above half a century, with all the care and attention that I was capable of: I have inquired into all matters among us, and have observed them, during the course of my life, with a particular application and impartiality. But my intention in writing was not so much to tell a fine tale to the world, and to amuse them with a discovery of many secrets, and of intrigues of state, to blast the memory of some, and to exalt others, to disgrace one party, and to recommend another: my chief design was better formed and deeper laid: it was to give such a discovery of errors in government, and of the excesses and follies of parties, as may make the next age wiser, by what I may tell them of the last. And I may presume, that the observations I have made, and the account that I have given, will gain me so much credit, that I may speak with a plain freedom to all sorts of persons: this not being to be published till after I am dead, when envy, jealousy, or hatred will be buried with me in my grave, I may hope, that what I am now to offer to succeeding ages, may be better heard, and less censured, than any thing I could offer to the present: so that this is a sort of testament, or dying speech, which I leave behind me, to be read and considered when I can speak no more: I do most earnestly beg of God to direct me in it, and to give it such an effect on the minds of those who read it, that I may do more good when dead, than I could ever hope to do while I was alive.¹⁴

14. Gilbert Burnet, *History of His Own Time*, ed. Martin Joseph Routh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1833), 6:183.

The simplicity and earnestness of this plea, addressed (as we might expect from a bishop) not only to the reader but also to a higher audience, reveal how contemporary histories are at once acts of compulsion, books that must be composed, and statements of demand, books that insist on being studied. As our mentors, their authors often speak with a unique passion; they see themselves as the evangelists of a better civil life.

Their hopes, however, have been largely frustrated. Although princes

and politicians have frequently been readers of history and have sometimes borrowed what they read to justify actions and programs, there is little evidence that contemporary histories, any more than retrospective histories, have shaped events. Obviously, particular books can influence assumptions and set policies: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would be a case in point. And Hobbes at least believed that a frequent cause of rebellion against monarchy was "the reading of the books of policy, and histories of the ancient Greeks and Romans."¹⁵ Nor can we overlook how a society's chosen memories of its past can affect its behavior, and to a remarkable degree. For example, American policy toward the Soviet Union today is in part a reflex to our way of remembering the so-called appeasers of the 1930s. But historians have probably more specific practical influence on other historians, as novelists have more influence on other novelists, than either has on the general reader. Each may articulate a set of alternative behaviors, or a code to define one's observations and responses, as does the evangelist, but the old Adam within us, collectively as well as individually, is the more powerful force. Perhaps that is why Burnet besought God to give his work "such an effect on the minds of those who read it." He sensed that it would take more than a history book to "make the next age wiser."

Few in our day would disagree, yet that has not prevented countless men and women from writing of the chaos and slaughter they have witnessed. Hell as a literary subject once belonged to the poets; now those who have been there and returned have a better claim. In number their books could fill a library; in power and eloquence they deserve the highest criticism. A Trotsky, a Djilas, or a Kissinger cannot be compared to a James Joyce or a Marcel Proust for inventiveness and imagination, but their books have weight and worth: they demand our attention. True stories, we learned as children, are the most fascinating, and narratives structured with beginnings and ends, and rich in heroes and villains, satisfy even when they dwell on such horrific events as the Holocaust. No century has been so generous to its contemporary historians.

Mention of the Holocaust returns us to "the greatest movement that had ever stirred the Hellenes," and Thucydides' need to explain it. The word *holokaustos*, meaning "burnt whole" or "in full flame," was familiar to Thucydides, and had his mind worked to metaphor he could conceivably have used it to characterize what he witnessed. For his pages record a society engulfed in destruction: armies butchering civilians as well as each other, cities coming apart as customs and restraints break down in revolution, and prisoners of war being herded like animals in rock quarries. Of course the casualties in the Peloponnesian War pale by our standards. Hundreds were killed in battle and riot rather than hundreds of thousands. But if the numbers do not match, the sense of the scale of the misery does, and it is the perception of extraordinariness that moved Thucydides to inquire. Legions of inquirers have followed him, believing that they too had lived through extraordinary times and feeling an obligation—to the dead, the living, the unborn—to interpret them. Without that sense of obligation history, retrospective or contemporary, might not have emerged; perhaps, indeed, the very recognition of history as process would not have been possible. And even today what sustains history

15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 214.

writing is that primal obligation to remember. The experience of life is responsible for it rather than any training, which is why history does not depend on the university, the library, or the grant. Knowing this, we owe the contemporary witness, whatever his imperfections, greater attention. For he never fails to tell us truth about his times, and he always reminds us of our common yearning to defeat oblivion.