

“As on a Darkling Plain”: Practitioners, Publics, Propagandists, and Ancient Historiography

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I

I am a professor of the history of Africa. I have spent four decades researching and writing about the historic West African forest kingdom of Asante (or Ashanti, now in Ghana), the most richly documented and most complex state and society in all of sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years I have become intrigued by the ways in which African histories authored by academic practitioners have been subjected to an ever-rising tide of readings, and misreadings, by interested publics and partisan propagandists. This paper addresses the problematic but understudied interaction between practitioners, publics, and propagandists in the understanding of history today. However, it is not about Africa.

It is about aspects of ancient historiography, and more precisely the possibilities and problems that inhere in the emergence of a new Achaemenid historiography since the 1980s in conscious opposition to venerable ancient Greek readings of the history and culture of Persia (Iran). At one level, it is about the thorny matter of “the West and the rest.”¹ Why? First, I think it good for outsider historians to review and assess the ideas and arguments set forth by practitioners, publics, and propagandists in fields other than their own. After all this is no more than intelligent analytic reading, an enterprise that would not have surprised omnivores like ‘Ibn Khaldun, Vico, or Gibbon, but that has now faded away as generalist comment has been supplanted by the boundary setting of self-conscious academic specialists.

Second, I reject wholly the orthodoxy embraced by many academic practitioners that their work exists in a quarantined compartment that is distinct

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¹ N. Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Allen Lane, 2011) terms non-Westerners “Resterners,” a neologism at once as unlovely as it is revealing.

from the worlds of publics and propagandists. Historical interpretation is a discursive conversation about contemporary concerns, or it is antiquarianism. It must be inclusive and engaged, not exclusive and detached. Historians should cast their eye over historiographies outside and beyond their own bailiwicks of guild specialization. In the long lost “republic of letters,” the comment of the outsider needs once again to count for more than it does at present.² In no way is what follows conclusive. My aim is simply to open things up to inspection, and not to inter them under an avalanche of exclusionary footnotes. I want to escape from a dialogue of the deaf, and discuss historical meanings that are too pressing to be left to a silence between practitioners, publics, and propagandists.

II

In 1996 the distinguished historian of ideas John Pocock published an essay on the historian as political actor. He argued that citizens have a stake in what is going on when historians rewrite their history for them. If rewriting entails reconstruction of the autonomy of citizens then it is right to ask why and for whom this is being done. Citizens here are analogous to subalterns. The academy discourses in a metalanguage that excludes them from its conversation. There are spaces in the public sphere where languages collide, however, and “The citizen, feeling that the language of the academy is being intruded upon him, may try in response to intrude his language on that of the academy.”³

There is a deal that is dry and detached about Pocock’s very academic observations. If we turn away from Pocock to, for example, Ferro’s *Le ressentiment dans l’Histoire*, we can see that any discussion of metalanguage and its opponents is not confined to the rules and procedures of an intellectual tennis match.⁴ The disillusionments of the idea of progress and the constraints imposed by globalization have created a world in which oppositional identities draw their strength from a loathing of the West and its presumptions of entitlement and hegemony.⁵ Pocock presumes reason, the property of the rich and secure. Ferro emphasizes unreason, the inheritance of the marginal and placeless. One does not have to be a Marxist to see that the deductive (or inductive) force of Western reason holds no sway among most of the world’s peoples. The truth, in Western understanding, is simply ideological.

III

In the years since 1996 the capacity for intrusive interaction between practitioners and publics has expanded beyond all recognition. From the

² P. Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1999).

³ J. Pocock, “The Historian as Political Actor in Polity, Society and Academy” (1996), reprinted in his *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 217–38, quote 227.

⁴ M. Ferro, *Le ressentiment dans l’Histoire* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131–32.

mid-1990s on, the World Wide Web became increasingly commercialized. This led to the speculative “dot-com bubble” of 1999–2001, after which unused telecommunications overcapacity was channeled into making the Web global and ubiquitous. In this new electronic world, history is a subject of compelling interest and participation. In its turn this has fuelled a proliferation of popular historical publications. Reciprocities between electronic and print cultures are now pervasive and are undergoing rapid if unpredictable expansion. Published histories of this process are swiftly overtaken by events.⁶

Throughout the 1980s–1990s academic historians absorbed the lessons of the linguistic and cultural turns. The objects of historical inquiry are now increasingly diverse and are apt to become even more so as permeabilities between the worlds of practitioners and publics grow. In his influential account of the impact of the cultural turn Eley observes that historians “succeed best by dialogue, by cooperation, and by finding the points of connection beyond our immediate scholarly concerns.”⁷ This unexceptional rallying cry comes as historians are exhorted to think very hard about their purposes and practices “in a moment of great cultural instability and uncertainty.”⁸ This unease arises from history’s embrace of other disciplines and the advance of the Web, but it has real-world causes as well.

A case might be made for a confluence of uncertainty forged by matters just described in tandem with the politics of the post-9/11 world. Historians became more open than ever before to cultural diversity, just as they were confronted with a world in which the old politics of “the West and the rest” assumed a renewed and pointed salience. The uses of academic history came under external and internal interrogation in a variety of ways. Hosts of antagonistic propagandists and commentators flooded the Web with partisan histories, conspiracy theories, and resurrected atavisms. The Western military embraced the “cultural” turn. Anthropology and history were recruited into the service of a revamped counterinsurgency strategy.⁹ Historians, like Arnold’s Christian, found themselves “as on a darkling plain,” where “ignorant armies clash by night.”¹⁰

⁶ F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (London: Orion, 1997) is a prizewinning account of a future now in the past; see J. Cressler, *Silicon Earth: Introduction to the Microelectronics and Nanotechnology Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); N. Brügger, ed., *Web History* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); J. Ryan, *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future* (London: Reaktion, 2010).

⁷ G. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), xi.

⁸ G. Spiegel, “Presidential Address to the American Historical Association: The Task of the Historian,” *American Historical Review* 114, 1 (2009): 1–15, 14.

⁹ P. Porter, “Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War,” *Parameters* 37, 2 (2007): 45–58; D. Gregory, “The Rush to the Intimate: Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn in Late Modern War,” *Radical Philosophy* 150 (2008): 8–23.

¹⁰ M. Arnold, “Dover Beach,” in his *New Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1867); the poem was actually written c. 1850.

Confidence in the efficacy of scholarly argument has been leached away by the sense that few are listening in a fragmented world buzzing with the angry noises of partisan hatred and irrational declamation. If Enlightenment is Habermas' "unfinished project," then its completion seems further away than ever. The ivory tower is no defense, and neither is academic pretence that the great upsurge of unreason is nothing to do with scholarly concerns. A useful role for the historian in all of this is as a witness in a very precise sense. The forensic laying bare of historiographies provides testimonies and understandings of what practitioners, publics, and propagandists think they are doing, alone and with and to each other, and why they are doing it at particular times and in particular ways.

This is a case study of the themes adumbrated above. It explores the historiographies of Achaemenid Persia (Iran) and classical Greece, comparing and contrasting the two but also situating them within wider arenas of public and propagandist commentary.¹¹ It will become apparent that Pocock's discursive framework relies rather too much on edificatory conversation of the like-minded (Rorty), or rationally agreed prescriptions for discursive participation (Rawls).¹² Like other academic constructs its explanatory efficacy is compromised by contact with the real world. Ancient Persian and Greek histories reach over the centuries to inform and to inflame arguments about "the West and the rest" in the modern world. Massive disputes over hegemony, power, ethnicity, identity, and the rest are fought across a communicative terrain of unprecedented size and democratic inclusiveness. In this practitioners are the usable servitors of publics and propagandists. It is no good mimicking the ostrich's head in the sand. Academic historians must engage with and confront this world or risk marginalization.

It might be said that I have loaded the dice by considering historiographies that impact so insistently upon the concerns of the post-9/11 world. This particular point can be argued, but the larger point stands. In truth, the issues discussed below might have drawn their illustrative material from anywhere in the world. My own specialization in African history affords pointed variations on the themes dealt with here. I happened upon Achaemenid Persia. A summer's reading in France brought me up to speed with ancient Greek historiography, an old interest, but also alerted me to recent developments in the long moribund study of ancient Persia. This paper is the result of that reading. It also testifies

¹¹ I use the freighted terms "Persia" or "Iran" throughout as these seem appropriate.

¹² R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); "Rationality and Cultural Difference," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186–201; J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). Robert Brandom, Donald Davidson, Robert Nozick, Michael Sandel, Thomas Scanlon, Bernard Williams, and others have produced a large philosophical literature on Rorty's and Rawls' ideas.

to my conviction that practitioners of academic history ought occasionally to raise their eyes from their own specialization to mull over what their historical peers are saying about other times and places. Narrowness is an enemy of the circulation of ideas, and particularly when combined with academic boundary marking in a world where practitioners are vastly outnumbered by interested—in both senses of that term—publics and propagandists.

IV

In 1933–1934 old Etonians Robert Byron and Christopher Sykes traveled through Iran (Persia) and Afghanistan. Byron’s *The Road to Oxiana* recounts their adventures and its author’s search for the origins of Islamic architecture. The book is still regarded by some as a classic of travel writing, but it is shot through with the ruling class attitudes typical of the last flourish of Britain’s imperial heyday. Reza Shah, usurpatory first ruler of Iran’s Pahlavi dynasty, is caricatured throughout as “Mr. Marjoribanks.” His subjects are by turns comical, sinister, effete, and incompetent. In short, the book is steeped in the acid of casual racism and veneered with superiority and entitlement.¹³

Sykes was the son of British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes who created the Arab Bureau in Cairo, helped draft the Balfour Declaration, and negotiated the agreement with the French that partitioned the post-World War I Middle East.¹⁴ Understandably, Reza Shah thought Christopher a spy (which he was) and threatened to deport him. In 1934, while young Sykes battled expulsion, Byron went on alone to Persepolis. The fabled ruins of the Achaemenid capital, burned by Alexander of Macedon in 331 BC, were being excavated scientifically for the first time. The archaeologist in charge was Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948).¹⁵

Herzfeld first worked in Iran in 1905, and after much lobbying was allowed to survey and dig at Persepolis from 1931. He and Byron fell out over the latter’s request to take and reproduce photographs of the site. Herzfeld insisted that all copyrights pertaining to Persepolis belonged to his sponsor, Chicago’s Oriental Institute. Byron had to give way, but turned the elderly German into a comic Teutonic ogre in his book. However, revenge of this sort was hollow, for Byron knew that the “Herr Professor” was perhaps the

¹³ R. Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London: Macmillan, 1937); J. Knox, *Robert Byron: A Biography* (London: John Murray, 2003).

¹⁴ R. Adelson, *Mark Sykes: Portrait of an Amateur* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975); and see R. Storrs, *Orientalism* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1937).

¹⁵ A. Gunter and S. Hauser, eds., *Ernst Herzfeld and the Development of Near Eastern Studies 1900–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). In brief, S. Hauser “Herzfeld, Ernst,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (2003), at: www.iranicaonline.org; the *Encyclopaedia* is published in multi-volume print and electronic formats by Columbia University Press, but more articles are available online than have appeared thus far in print.

only man in the world capable of answering his questions about Achaemenid art, archaeology, and history.

Herzfeld was a formidable linguist and scholar, a polymath in the humanist traditions of nineteenth-century Germany.¹⁶ His work at Pasargadae and Persepolis laid down the foundations of Achaemenid archaeology and cultural history although he never wrote his findings up in any systematic way. His father was a doctor in the Prussian army and a Protestant convert, but his grandparents were Jewish. After 1933 Herzfeld based himself increasingly in London and then Princeton. Soon after meeting Byron he was forced from Iran. He was denounced as a Jew to the pro-German Reza Shah by one of his team members, Langsdorff, who later rose to be an *SS Standartenführer*. Serious work on the Achaemenid sites, so recently begun, now stuttered, although significant discoveries continued to be made in the years before the outbreak of world war in 1939. Thereafter, Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* got as far as planning an expedition to Iran to reclaim Darius I for the Aryan race.¹⁷

The Achaemenid empire was the largest single political entity in the world between its conquest of Babylon (539 BC) and its fall to the Macedonians (330s BC). For the first time lands and peoples from the Indus to the Balkans, and from central Asia to Upper Egypt, were embraced by a single political structure. It was a "world empire," the first of its kind. Yet as Herzfeld excavated at Persepolis its history was still largely unknown and unwritten, at least from its own perspective. From 1933–1938 Herzfeld and others had uncovered the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury cuneiform tablets, now in Chicago and Tehran. These would eventually open the door to a reconsideration of Achaemenid administrative history and the challenging of potent stereotypes.

In the nineteenth century, Rawlinson, Justi, Nöldeke, Darmesteter, and other European scholars stereotyped the Achaemenid rulers as "oriental despots." Decadent, and ruled over by women and eunuchs, they had fallen into terminal decline after their defeat by the Greeks in 490–479 BC. Alexander's victory over them in the 330s was predictable and inevitable. Whatever one thinks of Said's concept of "Orientalism," it certainly has one of its strongest props in this corpus of nineteenth-century writing. The point need not be labored. All the scholars involved were trained to venerate classical Greece as the primordial ancestor of all those ennobling characteristics that had led to European dominion over the globe during their own lifetimes. The Achaemenids, by contrast, were ancient predecessors of all those modern colonial

¹⁶ For the German context, see S. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ H. Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 183–85.

“others” whose only hope for improvement and salvation lay in external agency.¹⁸

v

In 1987, *Iranian Studies* published a special issue on national research traditions in its field in France, both Germanies, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, and Russia. Linguistic, archaeological, art historical, and ethnographic matters dominated these surveys, and Herzfeld was respectfully cited. But history brought up the rear. The reader had to fossick to find information about current scholarship on the history of the first “world empire” of the Achaemenids. Indeed, in 1987 still the most widely used history was by the Chicago historian A. T. Olmstead, a collaborator of the Egyptologist J. Breasted. Both wanted to rescue the Near Eastern past from specialist linguists and archaeologists and reclaim it for narrative history. Olmstead’s book was first published in 1948, three years after its author’s death, and it remained in print ever after for lack of any significantly better alternative.¹⁹

Arguably, in the 1970s the most suggestive commentator on matters of Achaemenid history was the outstanding Oxford classicist D. Lewis. A master of Greek sources, he was also uniquely expert in Persian and Jewish evidence. His book *Sparta and Persia* (1977) embraced both of his subjects with great knowledge, flair, and insight. Nor did he shy away from some of the resonances of the past in the present. His book ended with a discussion of the deep representational roots of modern Greco-Turkish conflict over Aegean sovereignty. His was a singular voice, but it influenced key contributors to the revival of interest in the Achaemenid past. Until his death in 1994, Lewis was a major figure in emergent Persian as well as established Greek historical research, and acknowledged as such.²⁰

The 1987 Dutch survey did note that Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg of the University of Groningen was six years into a research project that aimed to correct the predominant “Hellenocentric view of Achaemenid history which has prevailed hitherto because of the preponderance of Greek sources.” Workshops with invited participants took place at “regular intervals.” The French

¹⁸ See P. Briant, “Milestones in the Development of Achaemenid Historiography in the Time of Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948),” in A. Gunter and S. Hauser, eds., *Ernst Herzfeld and the Development of Near Eastern Studies 1900–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 263–80; and T. Daryaei, “The Study of Ancient Iran in the Twentieth Century,” *Iranian Studies* 42, 4 (2009): 579–89.

¹⁹ A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); see too, “Albert Ten Eyck Olmstead (1880–1945) Memorial Issue,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 5, 1 (1946).

²⁰ D. Lewis, *Sparta and Persia: Lectures Delivered at the University of Cincinnati, Autumn 1976 in Memory of Donald W. Bradeen* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); see too, P. Rhodes, ed., *D. M. Lewis’s Selected Papers in Greek and Near Eastern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), which also contains a bibliography of Lewis’ writings.

survey noted that Achaemenid history was “mainly studied” by Pierre Briant of the University of Toulouse. He had already researched the Zagros plateau and written two books on ancient Middle Eastern topics using Greek but also Elamite sources as well as archaeology. It is only with hindsight that we can see that these cryptic notices signaled the beginnings of a historiographical revolution that led on to the creation of what came to be called the “new Achaemenid history.”²¹

Cooperation and collaboration were mandatory in getting new Achaemenid history off the ground. Source materials were very diverse and afflicted with an old and obdurate problem. They were variously written in Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian, Egyptian, Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Latin, as well as minor tongues like Carian, Lycian, Lydian, and Phrygian, some of which remain still undeciphered. No individual commanded all the necessary linguistic resources. The basic tasks of transcription and translation occupied many scholars to the exclusion of writing historical narrative. In truth, the variety of the sources inhibited and even precluded any sustained historical research effort conducted by individuals in isolation.

By all accounts Sancisi-Weerdenburg was a dynamic and politic organizer. It was her energetic persistence that led to the first meeting of invited scholars at an Achaemenid History Workshop in Groningen in 1983. Following this, she co-opted Amélie Kuhrt of University College, London as her fellow organizer. Later workshops were held in Groningen (in 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, and 1989), London (1985), and Ann Arbor (1990). Each workshop invited papers on a specific theme, and proceedings were revised and published as books. Many of these sold out as word spread that the annual workshops were exciting and the beginnings of a new phase in Achaemenid history.²²

²¹ “Iranian Studies in Europe and Japan,” *Iranian Studies* 20, 2–4 (1987). Quoted material is from the essays by J.T.P. de Bruijn, “Iranian Studies in the Netherlands,” 173, and B. Hourcade, “Iranian Studies in France,” 17. Initial accounts of Sancisi-Weerdenburg’s project are in *Persica: Uitgave van het Genootschap Nederland-Iran* 9 (1980): 231; 10 (1982): 273–75; 11 (1983): 185–94. See too P. Briant, *Etat et pasteurs au Moyen-Orient ancien/State and Herders in the Ancient Middle East* (Paris and Cambridge: Maison des Sciences de l’Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1982); and *L’Asie Centrale et les royaumes proche-orientaux du premier millénaire (c. VIIIe–IVe siècles avant notre ère)* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984).

²² The Proceedings of the Achaemenid History Workshops were all published by NINO Publications (Leiden). They are: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, ed., *Vol. 1: Sources, Structures and Syntheses* (1987); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Vol. 2: The Greek Sources* (1987); A. Kuhrt and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, eds., *Vol. 3: Method and Theory* (1988); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Vol. 4: Centre and Periphery* (1990); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and J. W. Drijvers, eds., *Vol. 5: The Roots of the European Tradition* (1990); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Vol. 6: Asia Minor and Egypt: Old Cultures in a New Empire* (1991); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and J. W. Drijvers, eds., *Vol. 7: Through Travellers’ Eyes* (1991); H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, A. Kuhrt, and M. C. Root, eds., *Vol. 8: Continuity and Change* (1994).

Sancisi-Weerdenburg was trained as a classicist, but also studied Old Persian and the archaeology of ancient Iran. Her doctoral dissertation anticipated many of the themes of the Achaemenid History Workshops. Completed in 1980, it sought to disentangle Achaemenid realities from the distorting web of the Greek texts.²³ The impact on her thinking of the linguistic and cultural turns is evident throughout. Her arguments show awareness of the tropology of historical reconstructions, and more especially of the hazards of seeing Achaemenid history through Greek textual lenses. In short, she placed existing Hellenocentric views of Persia under suspicion and interrogated their intent as discursive strategies.

Close reading suggests that Sancisi-Weerdenburg was influenced by Hayden White or at least by the public debate his work engendered. Following Burke, White took the literary idea of the trope or figural style and extended it to the discursive strategies of historians. The result, whether one agreed with it or not, was to raise questions about the objectively detached status of historians. White portrayed them as captives of their temporal milieu, (re)producing narratives governed by their own life experiences and articulated through the personal elaboration of received metaphors and other tropes. It is hardly difficult to see the appeal of such ideas to someone determined to expose the unstated in the formation of “Hellenocentrism.” Indeed, White himself wrote a short meditation on the Greco-Roman tradition.²⁴

Perhaps more pertinently, Sancisi-Weerdenburg was thinking and writing when Said’s *Orientalism* was in the first flush of its impact. Said’s argument was all at once original, elegant, and simple. It found an audience that was ready for its cultural message. It has proved remarkably enduring ever since.²⁵ Said traced the orientalizing tendency in Western thinking back to Greek constructions of the Achaemenids, and most precisely to the ways in which the Athenian Aeschylus portrayed Iranians in his play *Persians* (472 BC) as the earliest archetypical “other” of the Western imagination.²⁶ More works in a similar culturalist vein followed. Thus, the Achaemenid History Workshops were in progress when Bernal’s *Black Athena* challenged the

²³ See H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, “Yauna en Persai: Grieken en Perzen in een ander perspectief,” PhD thesis, Leiden University, 1980.

²⁴ H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); *The Greco-Roman Tradition* (New York: Harper Collins for Joanna Cotler Books, 1974); H. White and R. Doran, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); and see R. Wess, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁵ E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). For ongoing debate thirty years after publication, consult I. Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’* (London: Prometheus, 2007); R. Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); and A. Adib-Moghaddam, *The Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* (London: Hurst, 2010).

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 21, 56–57.

received orthodoxies of Hellenic originality by arguing for the “Afroasiatic roots” of Greek culture.²⁷

Such heady polemics reinforced the desire of participants in the Achaemenid History Workshops to rid their subject of its “Hellenocentricity.” In 1983 J. M. Cook, a retired archaeologist and classical Greek historian from the University of Bristol, published *The Persian Empire* as the first general survey of the subject since Olmstead. Some thought that Cook was turned into something of a “Hellenocentric” whipping boy by Achaemenid History Workshop participants. One such was the distinguished classicist S. Hornblower, who complained that the new Achaemenid historians were so besotted with the zealous rooting out of “Orientalism” that they were in some danger of denying that Iran—“as a matter of geographical fact”—does lie to the east of Groningen.²⁸

In reviewing the first three books produced from the Achaemenid History Workshops, Hornblower discerned “an unpleasant note of stridency” in what they said about the “alleged” holders of “traditional,” that is “Hellenocentric,” views. He judged the “new” Achaemenid history to be “provisional,” but conceded that it included “some of the most interesting work ever published” on the subject. However, Hornblower thought Cook’s book “masterly,” and if he internalized new arguments for seeing Achaemenid Iran on its own terms then he deployed them for rather orthodox ends.²⁹ As late as 1991 he cast the Achaemenid empire in the role of a bluntly obstructive impediment to the ongoing “hellenisation” of Asia Minor and the East between the ages of Cyrus and Alexander.³⁰

VI

Sancisi-Weerdenburg thought up and organized the Achaemenid History Workshops. She was also a productive scholar in her own right. She made important contributions to both Iranian and classical Greek history. In 2000, however, she died quite suddenly in her mid-fifties.³¹ Few would dissent from the claim, then or now, that the leading scholar and producer of the new Achaemenid history was not Sancisi-Weerdenburg, but the French impresario Pierre Briant. Trained

²⁷ M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

²⁸ S. Hornblower, “Achaemenid History,” *The Classical Review* 40, 1 (1990): 89–95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 BC*, rev. ed. (London: Methuen, 1991), 3–4, 324.

³¹ See W. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt, eds., *A Persian Perspective: Essays in Memory of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg* (Leiden: NINO Publications, 2003), 1–7, for a bibliography of Sancisi-Weerdenburg’s publications in Dutch and English; A. Kuhrt, “Sancisi-Weerdenburg, Heleen,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (2009), at: www.iranicaonline.org, is an appreciation by a close collaborator; see too Kuhrt’s Memorial Lecture, “Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg and the reassessment of Xerxes’ reign,” Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2010.

in classical history at Poitiers and Besançon, Briant published his doctoral thesis in 1973.

This was on Antigonus the “One-Eyed” (*Antigone le Borgne*), one of the Macedonian *diadochi* or successors of Alexander the Great. Very much in the French style of that time, the book covered only two years (323–321 BC) in the life of its subject, but in huge detail.³² From 1974–1999 Briant was at Toulouse II (Le Mirail) university. He published a great deal on both Greek and Near Eastern themes. In 1983 he attended the first of the Achaemenid History Workshops. Afterwards, he awarded this event “a gold star” in his own intellectual development and in his realization that an emerging cadre of Achaemenid historians existed. Then, in 1996 his *chef d’oeuvre* appeared. This was a history of the Achaemenid empire that was nearly twelve hundred pages long.³³

Briant’s *Histoire de l’Empire perse* is a self-consciously monumental work. (I use here the English translation of 2002 with its new and informative Introduction). The narrative text alone runs almost to nine hundred pages. The rest is research notes, a bibliography of printed works, and an index of primary sources. In this final category Briant lists Greek, Latin, and Biblical texts; Elamite tablets; Achaemenid inscriptions; Babylonian chronicles, literary writings, and tablets; Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions; Aramaic, Avesta (Zoroastrian), and demotic texts; Lycian and Phoenician inscriptions; and data provided by numismatics and seals.

Briant’s English translator advised “uninitiated” readers to consult Wiesehöfer’s much shorter Iranian history, also published in 1996, before starting on *Histoire*. This was prudent counsel, for Briant’s book is thematic, presumes a high level of prior knowledge, and “is not a connected narrative history of the Persian Empire.” *Histoire* has large ambitions that were duly acknowledged by reviewers. Some of these hailed the book as a kind of encyclopedic masterwork and assessed it over many pages. *Histoire* was a scholarly and intellectual event and it was greeted as such. It was a capstone to and a vindication of the “new” Achaemenid history.³⁴

As noted, Briant wrote a new Introduction to the English translation of his book, in which he produced an *ego-histoire* telling readers about its genesis and writing.³⁵ Work on Antigonus and Phrygia had led him on to think about the Achaemenids. He did some work on the Zagros and began to think further

³² P. Briant, *Antigone le Borgne* (Ann. Lit. de l’Univ. de Besançon, 152, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

³³ P. Briant, *Histoire de l’Empire perse: De Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); this was translated by P. T. Daniels and published with a new Introduction by Briant as *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

³⁴ J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996); M. Stolper, “Une ‘vision dure’ de l’histoire achéménide (note critique),” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 54, 5 (1999): 1109–26.

³⁵ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 1–10.

about the received orthodoxy concerning the Achaemenid empire. The latter was largely the creation of classicists who employed Greek texts to paint a disobliging portrait of Achaemenid Iran. It posited a long spiral of Achaemenid decline in the fifth century after the Greco-Persian wars (490–479 BC), and decadence in the fourth century that ended with absolute defeat by Alexander of Macedon (330s BC).

Briant countered that the Achaemenid empire was neither in decline nor decadent in the fifth and fourth centuries. Its local defeat in Greece in 490–479 BC was exaggerated by the Greeks after their unlikely victory, and by later Europeans out of a mixture of chauvinism, imperialism, and Orientalism. Alexander and the Seleucids inherited and adapted a vigorous Achaemenid state structure rooted in administrative dynamism and ethnic cohabitation. Alexander was in many ways “the last of the Achaemenids,” and “extraordinary continuities” accompanied his Macedonian “graft” onto Iranian “stock.” Ideas of Achaemenid decline and decadence owed much more to the repetition of a xenophobic Greek catechism about the “other” as counterpart to nagging questions about the nature of Hellenic identity than it did to historical evidence.³⁶

Briant was quite candid about his own research. He disclaimed expertise in any of the relevant Near Eastern languages. He used translations and originals in parallel and if uncertain he consulted philologists. In any case, he said disarmingly but truthfully, no one had all the required skills. The Achaemenid History Workshops had shown a way to fruitful cooperation and solidarity. This was why Briant said *Histoire* was “exhaustive,” at least as a synthesis derived from “encyclopedism.” Literally, everyone and everything had been consulted. However, in the writing of *Histoire* Briant had to confront an intractable problem. This he attempted to resolve through dissolution, for it was not amenable to resolution.

As *Histoire* confessed, Achaemenid historical understanding eschewed matters of fact, event, and narrative. It worked instead to impart a transhistorical “mythic expression” centered on timeless religious truth, dynastic principle, and kingly virtues. The consequence of this was that the Achaemenids bequeathed no written testimonies. To Briant, this had produced an “extraordinary situation.” The “narrative thread” of Achaemenid history had to be recuperated from the writings of their Greek enemies and subjects. Just to tell his (hi)story, Briant was unavoidably reduced to a quite “overwhelming reliance on Greek historiography.” The “new” Achaemenid history had to winnow and deconstruct often ignorant, invented, fantastic, hostile, or otherwise questionable Greek sources just to find and reconstruct its own narrative.

³⁶ Ibid., 873–75.

This difficulty was as old as Achaemenid history, and it is apparent throughout *Histoire*. Let us focus on Briant’s discussion of the defeat of Xerxes the Great King by Athens and its allies in 480–479 BC. His analysis of the second Achaemenid invasion of Greece, and the battles of Marathon, Salamis, Plataea, and Mykale, is really a reflection on the only major narrative historical source. This is the *Histories* of Herodotus, Books VII–IX. The author was a subject of the Great King, of mixed Greek and Carian descent and from Halicarnassus (Bodrum) in Asia Minor. He was famously not an eyewitness of the events he describes, but wrote some fifty years afterwards. Now the veracity or otherwise of Herodotus is hugely contentious, but for the moment we are concerned only with Briant’s deconstruction of his text for the purposes of writing Achaemenid history.

Briant’s strategy is a variant of the binary opposition that French classicists—Loraux, Detienne, Vernant, Vidal-Naquet—took from Lévi-Strauss’ anthropology to rework and apply to the ancient world. Simply, Herodotus’ portrait of Xerxes the Great King in defeat is not primarily a historical narrative of events but a mythography that was projected onto him to mirror Greek speculations about just how and why they had contrived to achieve victory over him. Facts, *les événements*, in this recounting might be true or not but that is beside the point. They are there to garland and embellish the mythographic pedagogy that structures the emplotment.³⁷

Despite its plethora of (hi)stories and ethnographies the Herodotean world is airless. It has neither parallel nor peer nor dissenting account. It is hermetic, not a narrative but *the* narrative of the Greco-Persian wars. Briant approached it, so to speak, from the east, casting radical suspicion on embedded Western interpretations. It is testimony to the vexed issues of civilizational identities, and of the long, turbulent histories that flow from this single source, that questions have always been asked of Herodotus. His seductive combination of prolixity and opacity means that he can always be squeezed to offer up new readings to new readers in different times. He is a great solitary, and to interrogate him anew has long been an industry.

Briant’s book was a *succès d’estime*. It appeared as historians sought out new subjects and approaches inspired by the linguistic and cultural turns. It marked the coming of age of the new Achaemenid history, and it was a virtuoso confection of non-narrative Achaemenid sources with their often-discontinuous Greek literary counterparts. Briant uncovered thematic structures that suggested lines for future research. Institutional recognition followed; in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 515–67; see too, C. Tuplin, ed., *Persian Responses: Political and Cultural Interactions with(in) the Achaemenid Empire* (Swansea: University of Wales Press, 2007); N. Loraux, G. Nagy, and L. Slatkin, eds., *Antiquities: Postwar French Thought, Volume III* (New York: New Press, 2001).

1999 the Collège de France created a chair specifically for Briant in *Histoire et civilisation du monde achéménide et de l'empire d'Alexandre*. He was now at the pinnacle of French university life as one of Bourdieu's "consecrated heretics," a worker in a recondite field more or less liberated into fulltime research.³⁸ Briant embedded himself at the heart of Achaemenid research. He delivered lectures on the present and the future of his subject, and created an interactive website to hold together the community of scholars first assembled by Sancisi-Weerdenburg.³⁹

Over the last decade Briant has written more, most notably a book of six hundred and fifty pages on Darius III and Alexander, and an incisive "open letter" to the latter.⁴⁰ Others have also progressed Achaemenid history, and landmark books appeared in 2007 and 2010. The first was a one-thousand-page corpus of sources edited by Kuhrt. The second was a six-hundred-page "major new appraisal" of the field edited by J. Curtis and St. John Simpson from papers given at the British Museum's "World of Achaemenid Persia" conference in 2005.⁴¹

VII

In terms of research and publication the infrastructure of Achaemenid history looks more robust than it did only a very few years ago. A reinvigorated sub-field, we might say, has been born and is flourishing. But that is not the whole story. Briant himself has expressed epistemological reservations about the status of this field. He contrasts the "accumulated erudition" and "bibliographical tautology" of much writing with his own doubts about "progress in the order of knowledge." What is genuinely new as evidence, as interpretation? And is it possible to discern the lineaments of a genuine scholarly progress in Achaemenid history?⁴²

The answer is by no means straightforward. Kuhrt's source book, for example, simply underlines the degree to which the narrative of Achaemenid history relies on Greek or later Western classical writers. Chief among these by some distance and predictably is Herodotus, but Xenophon, Arrian, and later writers are vital as well. Kuhrt's "Index of Texts" highlights this

³⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984); and *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d'Agir, 2004).

³⁹ P. Briant, "Leçon inaugurale," delivered at the Collège de France (10 Mar. 2000); and "New Trends in Achaemenid History," Noruz Lecture of the Foundation for Iranian Studies, delivered at the Collège de France (23 Mar. 2001); the website is at: <http://www.achemenet.com>.

⁴⁰ P. Briant, *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); and *Lettre ouverte à Alexandre le Grand* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008).

⁴¹ A. Kuhrt, ed., *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); J. Curtis and St. John Simpson, eds., *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

⁴² See, most starkly, P. Briant, "New Trends," 1.

dependence in stark relief.⁴³ Classical sources cover events that were of significance to the Greeks and to their world. The consequence is that much Achaemenid narrative history is passed over in silence, or is not available or amenable to reconstruction in any meaningful detail. So, instead, we seem left only with Briant’s “accumulated erudition.”

This is suggested by the volume edited by Curtis and Simpson. The book has fifty-one chapters in all, only seven of which form a section on history and historiography. The rest discuss religion (five), gender (three), art and architecture (seven), archaeology (seven), seals and coins (six), gold, silver, glass and faience ware (six), and regional studies, chiefly archaeological (ten). And it is clear if unsurprising that there are major problems in furnishing narrative history at the regional level.⁴⁴ The result is as Briant suspected: the “timeless” ethnographic or antiquarian topics are better served than their historical counterparts. However, returning to Pocock’s remarks at the start of this paper, it is evident that this academic construct does not exist in isolation.

A new (or renewed) historiography must be understood in relation to its local context, in this case the political world of twentieth-century Iran. The Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) took power in a coup against its compromised and enfeebled Qajar predecessors. Both of the Pahlavi rulers, father (“Mr. Marjoribanks”) and son, were sensitive about their legitimacy. They used the antiquities law of 1931, partly created by Herzfeld, to promulgate a nationalist project rooted in Iranian ownership of the Iranian past. They cast that project as an evolving but ahistorical national epic in the Achaemenid style, a royal pageant that commenced with Cyrus the Great, then advanced via the Seleucids, Parthians, Sasanians, Safavids, and Qajars, and culminated with themselves. In 1971, notoriously, this nationalist fable was acted out in a royal extravaganza. The Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, orchestrated a costly celebration of the supposed 2,500th anniversary of the creation of the Iranian monarchy by the Achaemenid ruler Cyrus the Great.

The Shah built a city of tents for foreign royalty and his other guests at the ruins of the Achaemenid capital Persepolis. His visitors were treated to a parade of troops clad in costumes, said to have been designed by Lanvin, from every dynastic period of the Iranian past. In a wooden piece of symbolism, the Shah dedicated his nation to Cyrus at the latter’s tomb at Pasargadae. He inaugurated a Museum of Persian History at the newly built and monumental Shahyad (now the Azedi) Tower that still dominates the skyline of Tehran. Pride of place in the new museum was given to a copy of the so-called Cyrus Cylinder (the original being in London’s British Museum), a clay object inscribed in Babylonian

⁴³ Kuhrt, ed., *Persian Empire* (2007), “Index of Texts,” 890–909.

⁴⁴ E. Dusinberre, *Aspects of Empire in Achaemenid Sardis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); C. Roosevelt, *The Archaeology of Lydia, from Gyges to Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

cuneiform. To the Shah, the standard royal Mesopotamian reformist rhetoric written on this cylinder was nothing less than the first human rights charter in world history.⁴⁵

Historical research under the Pahlavis was constrained and stunted by politics.⁴⁶ The Achaemenids were a subject for celebration and not investigation in Iran, and foreign scholars interested themselves in the Qajar and Pahlavi eras because of the wealth of sources about them in accessible Western diplomatic archives. This situation changed but hardly improved during the Islamic Revolution (1978–1982) that toppled the Shah and replaced him with the present Islamic Republic. Within Iran there was a “growing interest” in studying the recent past as new Qajar and Pahlavi materials were opened up to historians. But Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic religious successors thought the Achaemenids doubly cursed as non-Muslim infidels, and as the originators of the now anathematized institution of tyrannical monarchy.⁴⁷

For foreign scholars the Islamic Revolution ushered in a period of great difficulty in carrying out research in Iran. The “hostage crisis” with the United States (1979–1981), followed by the murderously prolonged Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), more or less closed the country to outsiders. Sancisi-Weerdenburg’s research initiative in 1981 was in part a response to the damaging “pall” that international politics had cast over work by foreign scholars in and on Iran. Scholarly waters were muddied further by claim and counterclaim that Tehran was neglecting and even demolishing Achaemenid sites in a fit of Islamic iconoclasm masquerading as “modernization.” The truth or not of all of this is moot. It is true that Iranian clerics deplored the Achaemenid past as non-Muslim, but at the same time that past was a part of the patriotism that sustained commitment to fighting against Iraq. Be that as it may, there can be little doubt that the 1980s saw cleavages in all of those communities, academic and otherwise, that had a stake in the interpretation of Iran’s past in relation to its present.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See *Paris Match*, no. 1172, “Farah et le Chah: les fêtes fastueuses de Persépolis,” 23 Oct. 1971; an oral account of the Persepolis celebrations by Abdolreza Ansari, ex-Iranian minister of the interior, given to Cyrus Kadivar in Paris in 2002, is at www.iranian.com; and see too, T. Grigor, “Preserving the Antique Modern: Persepolis ‘71,” www.arch.columbia.edu. On the Cyrus Cylinder, see T. C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence* (London: British Museum Press, 2004), doc. 49, 92; A. Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 8, 25 (1983): 83–97, esp. 84.

⁴⁶ See A. Aminat, “Historiography IX: Pahlavi Period,” in E. Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica. Vol. 12. Harem I–Illuminationism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); K. Bayat, “The Pahlavi School of Historiography on the Pahlavi Era,” in T. Atabaki, ed., *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 113–20.

⁴⁷ K. S. Aghaie, “Islamist Historiography in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” in T. Atabaki, ed., *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 233–64.

⁴⁸ See M. C. Root, “Obituary: Heleen W.A.M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg,” *University Record* (University of Michigan at Ann Arbor), 19 June 2000.

VIII

The new Achaemenid history has to contend with the warring voices of all of those publics and propagandists for whom Iranian history and current politics are violently contested issues. A symptomatic instance occurred in 2008 when a review of Kaveh Farrokh's *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* appeared in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (*BMCR*), an established journal of record. The reviewer was Jona Lendering, but before we look at the individuals involved let us consider the review itself. It was unqualifiedly damning. *Shadows* was “an exceptionally bad book,” and indeed “the manuscript ought to have been returned to its author.”⁴⁹ Lendering was exercised by Farrokh's failure to cite Sancisi-Weerdenburg or Briant, and by the fact that he had ignored new Achaemenid history in general.

Lendering also accused Farrokh of “relying on the Internet, confusing hypotheses with facts, and repeating propaganda.” The last of these crimes consisted in reiterating the Pahlavi assertion that the Cyrus Cylinder was the world's first human rights charter. This jeremiad ended with a warning to new Achaemenid history practitioners. It was their own failure to get their message across that resulted in books like *Shadows*, in which propagandists of whatever persuasion might inflict outmoded or unsupported views on the public. For good measure, Holland's best selling popular history *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*, a post-9/11 title among many of the same sort, was similarly excoriated for its ignorance of new Achaemenid history.⁵⁰

In 2009 *BMCR* received and published a letter supporting Farrokh against Lendering. It was signed by seven people, mostly Georgians, led by a sometime Georgian minister of state named Professor Valeri Vashakidze.⁵¹ It is difficult to decode the politics of this communication. It describes new Achaemenid historical views as controversial and cites an extensive, older literature, and particularly on the Cyrus Cylinder's status as a human rights charter. Here we are clearly amidst the post-Soviet politics of Iran and the Caucasus, and the extreme salience in this part of the globe of issues of nation and identity. It is beyond my remit and competence to try to analyze the factors that might be in play here, but the status of Iranian Azerbaijanis is among them, as is the ancient matter of Aryanism. Farrokh himself is an unclear figure, long on opinions and short on useful biographical information. He has links to the Iranian diasporic, pro-Pahlavi, anti-Islamic Republic journal *Rozaneh*, and

⁴⁹ *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, online at: <http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2008/2008-09-62.html>. See K. Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2007).

⁵⁰ T. Holland, *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).

⁵¹ *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, online at: <http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2009/2009-02-02.html>.

has written extensively on Pan-Turanianism and the perils of Turkish ambitions in the Caucasus, Iran, and beyond.⁵²

Not that Lendering is a figure of much more ready transparency than Farrokh. He is Dutch, taught at Amsterdam's Free University, but since 1996 has run a large and busy ancient history website.⁵³ This is allied to a public history-teaching program, *Livius Onderwijs*, with branches in a number of Dutch towns, which has conducted history tours to Iran and other countries. Lendering writes exclusively in Dutch and seems especially interested in ancient warfare (a subject of wide appeal, as we shall see presently). His review in *BMCR* was a skirmish in a running battle with Farrokh. In 2009 this took an odd turn when Farrokh posted an e-mail that was allegedly sent by Dr. Wouter Henkelman of Amsterdam's Free University to a third party. As noted, Henkelman was a co-editor with Kuhrt of the 2003 volume of essays in memory of Sancisi-Weerdenburg. In the e-mail Henkelman is reported as claiming that the Vashakidze letter supporting Farrokh was "a hoax," and that the "Ossetian" Farrokh inhabited a "fairytale world."⁵⁴

Minor in itself, a quarrel like that just described demands to be understood in terms of vast, procrustean historical forces that envelop practitioners, propagandists, and publics alike. Take Iranian experience and perception. Ahmad Ashraf, distinguished sociologist and managing editor of *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, has written compellingly of how the interventions of the British, Russians, Turks, Germans, and Americans have led Iranians to embrace "conspiracy theories as a basic mode of understanding politics and history."⁵⁵ Symptomatic here is the influential thought of Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994). His reading of Heidegger on the Greek philosophers led him to believe that Western culture had surrendered its spiritual values in exchange for questing after mastery of the material world. The result of this for Iranians was *gharb-zadegi*, being "plagued by the West" or "westoxication," a manifestation of evil in its eternal dualist struggle with good. Since the first encounter between Greeks and Achaemenids the West has conspired to subject Iran to "Hellenization." Iranian intellectuals have themselves challenged this ahistorical

⁵² C. King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For "The Official Website of Dr. Kaveh Farrokh (Ph.D.)," see <http://KavehFarrokh.com>, which links to his "Pan-Turanianism Takes Aim at Azerbaijan: A Geopolitical Agenda." For revivals of Azerbaijani separatism in Iran now, see N. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, updated edition, 2006), esp. 332.

⁵³ See <http://www.livius.org>.

⁵⁴ See <http://www.kavehfarrokh.com/articles>, "An Example of Anger and Bitterness: Dr. Wouter Henkelman, a Professor of Iranian Studies."

⁵⁵ A. Ashraf, "The Appeal of Conspiracy Theories to Persians," in Y. Arat, A. Ashraf, A. Baram, W. Harris, and H. Lowry, *Challenges to Democracy in the Middle East* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1997), 57–88; and, "Conspiracy Theories," *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, at: www.iranicaonline.org.

construct, but it has percolated into popular public understanding and has been made explanatory use of by Ayatollah Khomeini and ideologues of the Islamic Republic.⁵⁶

The Farrokh-Lendering imbroglio is an overheated instance of contentions that flood the World Wide Web. Iranian nationalists, supporters and opponents alike of the events of 1979, are united in vaunting the civilizational “humanistic world view” of the Achaemenids. The casting of the Cyrus Cylinder as a charter of human rights has led many to see the world of the Achaemenids as a multi-cultural ideal. Similarly, the mention of the “wise lord” Ahuramazda (though not the prophet Zarathustra) in Achaemenid inscriptions has persuaded many that Cyrus the Great and his kingly successors subscribed to the teachings of the Avesta. For example, Avestan ethics forbade slavery, and so it is argued that it was “banned” or otherwise severely limited within the Achaemenid empire. All these ideas serve to underscore the civilizational attainments of ancient Persia, and in doing so they counter the negative assumptions of ancient and modern Westerners about an old and decadent Persian monarchy and a new and challenging Islamic republic.⁵⁷

IX

New Achaemenid history practitioners and Iranian publics are different sorts of people. That said, both identify problems that revolve around and emanate from “Hellenization.” Like all concepts of such durability and breadth, this dissolves or fragments when it is interrogated to yield up a concise, non-negotiable meaning. “Hellenization” is a body of historical mindsets and practices, for good or ill the earliest boundary marker of the West’s attitudes and behavior towards the rest. It is Western in origin, but reciprocally constructed. There can be no “selves” without “others.” This is the binary of inequality that Said claimed to see in the literature of “Orientalism.” But he knew very well that if his reading had validity, then it also had real-world consequences.

Classics is an enormous field, but of a particular kind. Outsiders cannot help but notice that it is a project centered on the repeated analysis and exegesis

⁵⁶ Fardid wrote little. His ideas were popularized by Jamal Al-e-Ahmad, in *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, Robert Campbell trans., Hamid Algar, ed. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984 [1962]) which from 1962 circulated clandestinely but with great impact in Iran. Fardid has been criticized since his death; see M. and A. Sadri, eds., *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Guidance for the non-Farsi speaker is provided by Keddie, *Modern Iran*; and R. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

⁵⁷ See, for example, http://www.wn.com/achaemenid_slavery; <http://www.irandefence.net>; and *Rozaneh*, an online Iranian cultural magazine, at <http://www.rozanehmagazine.com/>. For slavery, see M. Dandamayev, “Barda and Barda-Dari,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, at <http://www.ivanicaonline.org>. Gore Vidal’s *Creation* (New York: Random House, 1981) is a novel whose premise is that the Achaemenids were more “civilized” than their Greek counterparts; its fictional narrator Cyrus Spitama is Zarathustra’s grandson.

of the same corpus of canonical texts.⁵⁸ Fragmentary additions to this corpus are greeted with excitement and investigated with vigor. A bemusing illustration is the fuss made about what has been called the “new” Simonides. Born around 556 BC and dying, so it is said, at ninety, Simonides of Ceos (Kea) was a prolifically skilled poet in many genres, highly rated by his contemporaries and by later scholars. Unfortunately, not one of his poems survives intact. In the twentieth century new fragments by him were unearthed from the rubbish heaps at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt.⁵⁹ Much has been made of these bits and pieces (POxy 2327, 3965) by textualists.⁶⁰ They seem to be excerpts from an elegy about the battle of Plataea (479 BC), but contain little or no historical information.

Writing Greek history is embedded in a potent tradition of textual valorization. That is, it is located within and serves the purposes of Western self-understanding. Its academic development, pioneered by German classicists, is famously intertwined with the pursuit of *Bildung* and the realization of Western identity. This makes for a conservatism and a consensus in which history writing is more than usually encoded within its established and received narratives. An authoritative recent discussion, for example, declares as an unexamined given that it was “unsurprising” that an “extraordinary victory” over Darius and Xerxes led the Greeks “to entertain the idea of a primordial division of the world into two opposing halves,” brave and free Greece and “the inferior, Asiatic half of the world.” Herodotus stands as sole exception to “this crude ethnic dualism,” although his “relativist” ethnographies are overshadowed by his “detailed and thrilling” narrative of Achaemenid defeat.⁶¹

Evidence here is literally the same things over and over again. It is a palimpsest written and rewritten over centuries. The linguistic and cultural turns in classics sensitized and reoriented approaches and techniques, but could do nothing to augment the parsimony of historical evidence. Let us return to Herodotus. Let us leave aside the sterile debates over whether he was “father” of history or of lies.⁶² Let us leave aside too those whose attentions

⁵⁸ For lively comment, see M. Beard, “Which Thucydides Can You Trust?,” *New York Review of Books* LVII, 14 (2010): 52–54. It is too early to judge, but a minority of (younger?) classicists seem determined to escape textualism and to engage with the classical tradition in relation to current political concerns. See, for example, K. Vlassopoulos, *Politics: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); and consult the publishing and other networks listed at the entry for P. Vasunia, at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk>. The website <http://www.rogueclassicism.com> is busy, irreverent, and informative.

⁵⁹ See P. Parsons, *City of the Sharp-nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007); and “Oxyrhynchus Online,” at: www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy.

⁶⁰ D. Boedeker and D. Sider, eds., *The New Simonides: Contexts of Praise and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶¹ S. Price and P. Thonemann, *The Birth of Classical Europe: A History from Troy to Augustine. The Penguin History of Europe, Vol. 1* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 113–17.

⁶² For “the liar school,” D. Fehling, *Herodotus and His ‘Sources’: Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Chester: Francis Cairns, 1989); W. Pritchett, *The Liar School of Herodotus*

are paid to Herodotus the structuralist, narratologist, poet, or scientist.⁶³ Just what did Herodotus know about the Persian wars, who exactly told him, and in what precise settings and circumstances?

It is said that the basic quality of the *Histories* is their local dimension.⁶⁴ If this is the case then difficulties arise. Herodotus gives little help in identifying specific informants; in describing where and in what circumstances he spoke with them; in distinguishing contradictions in his oral testimonies; in clarifying if it is a person or a group providing information; in separating verbal from other kinds of resources; or in trying to winnow out personal statements from generic accounts. The Herodotean schema is sometimes situated within the broader world of oral historical studies but not in any very sustained way.⁶⁵

Be that as it may, it is still the case that a generation after the event Herodotus did talk to participants in the wars of 490–479 BC. These included Persians and other subjects of the Great King, though the Herodotean picture of Achaemenid society itself has odd confusions and egregious errors in it.⁶⁶ Classical textualists try to get beyond poring over the glassy empirical surfaces of the *Histories* by probing motivation and intent. This can generate sophisticated readings. One such, drawing its interpretive tools from Iser’s theory of reader response, sees the Herodotean Xerxes as the construct of both Greek and Achaemenid paradigms. This shifts argument away from a single or a stable meaning towards endlessly contestable readings. Here Herodotus is used to empower strategies of “reading into” and not a “reading” in itself. This is sprightly and stimulating to be sure, but it is an achievement bought at the price of placing the vexed issue of Herodotus’ sources on one side. *C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas l’histoire.*⁶⁷

Classicists reacted to the linguistic and cultural turns, Said’s ideas included, by looking anew at Greek constructions of the Persian “other.”

(Amsterdam: Gieben, 1993); O. Armayor, *Herodotus’ Autopsy of the Fayoum: Lake Moeris and the Labyrinth of Egypt* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1985).

⁶³ F. Hartog, *Le miroir d’Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l’autre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); G. Nagy, *Pindar’s Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), esp. chs. 8–11; R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); R. Munson, *Telling Wonders: Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁶⁴ N. Luraghi, ed., *The Historian’s Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶⁵ The best such study is R. Thomas, “Herodotus’ *Histories* and the Floating Gap,” in Luraghi (see note 64).

⁶⁶ C. Tuplin, “Herodotus on Persia and the Persian Empire,” App. M, in R. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (London: Quercus, 2008).

⁶⁷ E. Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); see too W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Again, the approach was textualist, literary, anthropological, or even theatrical rather than historical. Herodotus was read in tandem with Said's ur-text, the *Persians* of Aeschylus.⁶⁸ Now Aeschylus fought at Marathon (490 BC), where his brother was felled by an axe, and he probably witnessed the naval battle at Salamis (480 BC). So, unlike Herodotus, he was eyewitness to and participant in the war with Darius and Xerxes. It is commonly argued that Aeschylus' tragedy contrasts free Athens and slavish Persia, with the latter serving as warning to the former of the perils of *hybris*. This has the added advantage of casting the play as the bearer of a universal message about human suffering.⁶⁹

The most arresting passages in the play, however, are not about suffering humanity, but specifically and graphically about slaughtering Persians. In a striking metaphor, the status of men is withdrawn from the enemy "other" and instead they are cast as bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*). These large, much prized fish are uniquely red-blooded. Until recently they were hunted in Sicily as they were in ancient Greece; that is, herded via a series of nets into an enclosed space and then stabbed and bludgeoned to death. The bloodletting was such that the killing was ritualized, as in the Sicilian *mattanza*.⁷⁰ In *Persians* the description of a sea turned crimson by the Persian dead is a portrayal of a day of berserk, triumphalist butchery. Greek consumption of real bluefin tuna was class-based, but at Salamis hoplites, marines and sailors "consume" the Persian variant in a democratic solidarity of orgiastic killing and looting.⁷¹ If there is pity here then it is very much a feeling indulged after the event.

X

The reader surfaces from immersion in much classical scholarship with the sense of an endless remaking of the same textual bricks in the historical wall. Fastidiousness, or simply the finitude of resources? Whatever the answer, no such diffidence exists in the wider world. It probably never has, but definitely not in the world of 9/11, the "war on terror," and the widely trumpeted "clash of civilizations." These have fostered an urgent upsurge of interest in (hi)stories of West versus East. And there is no older tale in this repertoire than Greeks and Persians.

⁶⁸ See E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); M. Miller, *Athens and Persians in the Fifth Century BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); T. Harrison, *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' Persians and the History of the Fifth Century* (London: Duckworth, 2000); and T. Harrison, ed., *Greeks and Barbarians* (New York: Routledge, 2002); E. Bridges, E. Hall, and P. Rhodes, eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ See A. Garvie, ed., *Aeschylus: Persae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷⁰ T. Maggio, *Mattanza: The Ancient Sicilian Ritual of Bluefin Tuna Fishing* (New York: Penguin, 2001); D. Levine, "Tuna in Ancient Greece" (2000), at: www.uark.edu/campus-resources/dlevine.

⁷¹ On fish eating, see J. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London: Harper Collins, 1997); Miller, *Athens and Persians*, 29–62, for the loot.

In the Western world, popular historical retellings of the Greco-Persian conflict pour off the presses with thudding regularity. These feed a seemingly inexhaustible appetite and sell well despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that they tell the same tale over and over again. Market wisdom holds that the title identifies the book, while the subtitle lures the target readership. So, *Persian Fire* (2005, and multiply reprinted) is subtitled *The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*; so, *Thermopylae* (2006) is *The Battle that Defined History*, but later (2007) is *The Battle that Changed the World*; so, *Salamis* (2004) is *The Greatest Battle of the Ancient World, 480 BC*, and then (2005) it is *The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—and Western Civilization*; so, *Marathon* (2010) is the account of *How One Battle Changed Western Civilization*. Some books in this genre are by reputable ancient historians but they are works of synthesis at best and not research.⁷²

The appetite fed by such books is for history as fable. In the present political climate they are reassuring parables of an alien Eastern threat defeated. Like similarly themed fictions, they are also part of a booming market for accounts of warfare and of men in battle designed to resonate with the fantasies of their projected readership. Pressfield's best-selling *Gates of Fire* is a novel about Thermopylae, but the Spartans in it talk like U.S. Marines. This seems relatively harmless if mindless until one looks at Pressfield's busy website "Agora." This used to be called "It's the Tribes, Stupid" and it was created to increase awareness of "the tribal mind-set in Afghanistan." It receives shoals of e-mails daily from Western troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. These claim that "Agora" and *Gates of Fire* furnish insights into the Eastern (and undifferentiated), barbarian (and now Islamic) enemy.⁷³

The best-known fable of this sort is Zack Snyder's hugely profitable movie *300* (2007), based on the Frank Miller graphic novel of the same title.⁷⁴ This is an account of the battle of Thermopylae that uses superimposition technology to reproduce the imagery and "feel" of the original comic book. The Achaemenid army is a fantastical horde of men, animals, and monstrous beings, led by a hugely tall, androgynous Xerxes. His elite

⁷² See T. Holland, *Persian Fire*; P. Cartledge, *Thermopylae: The Battle that Defined History* (London: Macmillan, 2006); P. Cartledge, *Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World* (London: Pan, 2007); B. Strauss, *Salamis: The Greatest Battle of the Ancient World, 480 BC* (London: Hutchinson, 2004); B. Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—and Western Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005); R. Billows, *Marathon: How One Battle Changed Western Civilization* (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth, 2010).

⁷³ S. Pressfield, *Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Pressfield has written subsequent novels in the same vein about Alkibiades and Alexander of Macedon. "Agora" is a subscription website, but entering "Pressfield Agora" on the Web will bring up the public pages from which the information given here is drawn.

⁷⁴ Frank Miller, *300* (Milwaukie, Ore.: Dark Horse Books, 1999). Director Michael Mann was said to be considering filming *Gates of Fire* when Snyder's movie was released.

corps of Immortals wear sinister silvered masks. It is Ephialtes, a deformed and outcast Spartan, who betrays his heroic countrymen to the Persians. The movie is about heroic Westerners facing alien assault. It ends with revenge and the world set to rights again at the battle of Plataea. Iran lodged a complaint with UNESCO about the film's racist stereotypes. The Cambridge classicist Paul Cartledge, an authority on Sparta, advised the filmmakers but he distanced himself from the underlying message of civilized West versus barbarian East. No such qualms troubled the American classicist Victor Davis Hanson, who thought *300* evoked Herodotus and showed the "clash of civilisations."⁷⁵

Do popular histories, novels, and movies really matter? They do, at least when they are paralleled by seriously troubling developments that share in their ideas. Military history and theory used to be a rather staid academic backwater. But the wars of the post-9/11 era and the belated impact of the linguistic and cultural turns on military history, ideas, and theory have changed things. In the 1990s, the United States pursued a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that privileged technological innovation. This turned out to be of little use in asymmetrical conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A premium was placed upon acquiring cultural knowledge of the enemy. Simply put, anthropology and history moved to center stage.⁷⁶ One strand of this new thinking sought to draw lessons from the "first war of the worlds" between Western Greeks and non-Western Persians.

Many have embraced variants of the cultural turn in the study of warfare.⁷⁷ One of the most prolific and influential thinkers in this area is Hanson, just mentioned. He is a third-generation Californian raisin farmer, a sometime Professor of Classics, and now a leading conservative public intellectual. Hanson has a romantic attachment to the idea of the yeoman farmer, free and self-sufficient, but now under threat from government, agribusiness, and, in modern California, Hispanic immigration.⁷⁸ His Cincinnatus-style populism was shaped by his early work on smallholder agriculture in classical Greece.⁷⁹ Hanson is best known, however, for his many books on classical

⁷⁵ G. Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture: Greece and Rome Live* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2008), contains the most subtle reading of *300* in terms of its popular reception as a film and, importantly, as an item for comment on now-pervasive global electronic media like YouTube.

⁷⁶ See P. Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (London: Hurst, 2009).

⁷⁷ An early example is J. Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993). The cultural turn is the organizing principle in G. Parker, ed., *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ See V. Hanson, *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming* (New York: Encounter Books, 2003).

⁷⁹ V. Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (New York: Free Press, 1995); *Fields without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

and later military history. It was Hanson who formulated “the western way of war” as a cultural concept. This key idea in the new military history arose from Hanson’s work on Greek yeomen hoplites and their trial by battle against the subjects of oriental Achaemenid despots.⁸⁰

In Hanson’s view “the western way of war” is rooted in norms and continuities that go back to classical Greece. Tactically it is grounded in vital traditions of innovation, discipline, shock encounter, and decisive battle. Strategically its lethality arises from the cultural norms of civic militarism. These are a uniquely Western mixture of political freedom, capitalist enterprise, rational inquiry, and capacity for self-criticism. The binary opposite or “other” to this is an undifferentiated “East” and its culturally defined way of warfare. This is variously characterized as being indirect, evasive, stealthy, and directed either by authoritarian regimes or amorphously fluid “tribal” agglomerations. Conflict between these two traditions began in 490–479 BC and continues today.

It is easy to pick holes in Hanson’s over-determined cultural construct, but that is by the way. It is equally easy to see his underlying anxiety about the West’s will to go on using its legacy of military superiority, but that too is beside the point. The matter at issue is that the recent resurgence of thinking in Orientalist terms about “the West and the rest” has gained considerable traction among politicians and militaries as well as intellectuals and publics. We have come full circle. Modern Iranians seem here to occupy the place once occupied by their Achaemenid forebears.

XI

Let us begin this penultimate section with Edward Said. His seminal *Orientalism* has appeared from time to time throughout this paper. His impact on cultural history has been huge, and yet it is all too often forgotten that Said was not a historian but a literary critic. In an essay of rare insight the Oxford don and poet Tom Paulin has interrogated his good friend Said’s writings by using the canonical literary tool of close reading to get at his influences, methods, and purposes.⁸¹ Influences on Said’s prose style included Hazlitt, Swift, Yeats, and notably Hopkins. He pitched his critical tent in their shadow, railing against interpretive flaccidity and embracing criticism as a

⁸⁰ V. Hanson, *The Western Way of War* (New York: Knopf, 1989); *Hoplites: The Ancient Greek Battle Experience* (London: Routledge, 1991); *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); *Ripples of Battle: How Wars of the Past Still Determine How We Fight, How We Live, and How We Think* (New York: Random House, 2004). It is interesting to compare Hanson’s views with those expressed in D. Grene, *Of Farming and Classics: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁸¹ T. Paulin, “The Critic as Artist: Edward Said,” in his *Crusoe’s Secret: The Aesthetics of Dissent* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 382–400. This book is dedicated to Edward and Mariam Said.

type of performance. This is generally overlooked, but crucial to understanding *Orientalism*.⁸²

Said believed that the historian's plain reportorial style coerced the past into recording mere events. His methods and purposes were not about reconstructing history, but about choosing the linguistic and stylistic resources best suited to getting across his basic critical message of "speaking truth to power." This is the calculated stylistic technique of the *engagé* literary intellectual. It is also the work of a seducer, and historians were amongst those duly seduced. Said's arguments were, I repeat, original, elegant, and simple. They also belonged to a hallowed literary tradition of knowing and calculating persuasion.

There is a striking if little-remarked parallel here with ancient Greek historiography. Briant's short book on Alexander the Great was published in six French editions from 1974–2005 and in revised form in English translation in 2010. In a new Foreword to the English edition, Briant—with mounting frustration, one suspects—speaks plainly about the problems of the classical narrative sources.⁸³ These Greek sources (Arrian, Diodorus, Plutarch) and their Latin analogues (Quintus Curtius, Justin) "continue to form the core of the evidence" about Alexander.⁸⁴

None of these writers was a historian in any recognizable sense of the term. They were literary figures, using the prevailing literary conventions of imitation (*mimesis*) and contestation (*agon*) to produce works designed to establish their credentials as intellectuals within a literary tradition. The sources they produced "are generally more comparable to story-telling" than to critical history. To compound the problem all wrote after, and some long after, the event. *Quellenforschung* is no help, for we just do not know how information and interpretation were transmitted from one generation to another.⁸⁵ In the light of all this, Briant's book on Alexander is an Occamist account—prudently qualified, parsimoniously minimalist.

More clearly than any other work of the new Achaemenid history, successive rewrites of Briant's *Alexandre/Alexander* are marked by growing impatience with the project of historians of ancient Greece. Centuries of work have failed to overcome lacunae in the evidence and, rather like Said or the Alexander "historians," modern commentators necessarily subordinate an

⁸² As is, perhaps, Said's conflicted relationship with his cousin and ultimately rejected mentor Charles Malik. Malik ended by thinking that the suasion to dignity and personhood prompted "the clash of civilizations" rather than an incorporationist world view; see S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), esp. 65–66.

⁸³ The first edition is P. Briant, *Alexandre le Grand* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974); the English edition is *Alexander the Great and His Empire: A Short Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii–xix.

absent history to the cyclical literary task of refining the translation and exegesis of surviving texts. After generations of classical textualism the outsider cannot but raise a quizzical eye upon finding, for example, that Gomme’s five-volume critical commentary on Thucydides was followed almost immediately by Hornblower’s three volumes on the same topic.⁸⁶ *Mimesis? Agon?* Certainly questing after credentialization in a literary tradition.

Beard, in a notably acute review, traces successive mistranslations of Thucydides, the persistent and enduring opacities of his text, and points to the fact that “good” or “fluent” English versions of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* misleadingly read like *Finnegan’s Wake* “rewritten in the clear idiom of Jane Austen.” Yet Hornblower devoted twenty years and over two thousand pages to his version of Thucydides. At the end of her review Beard gives the game away. New research into Thucydides has supplanted older historical narratives deriving from him, but not with new ones.

Instead, the literary text *qua* text retains its hallowed primacy. Modern narratological and critical theories have now been brought to bear to investigate “how history is most truthfully told” in Thucydides, rather than whether or not his account is a reliable or authentic telling of events. This is an old story, and one that blankets all ancient Greek history. In fact, it is not history but *Bildung* in modern dress. Hornblower and other classicists are engaged in (re)presenting a Thucydides relevant to present concerns—“a Thucydides for tomorrow.” Ancient history seems stale, repetitive, even inverted at the limit of its endlessly rehashed “evidence.” If there is indeed, as one suspects, little more to tell, then we are truly becalmed in a Sargasso of Western self-interrogation.⁸⁷

The new Achaemenid history is snared within the coils of its ancient Greek narrative sources. It can argue for a change of optic, a view from Persepolis rather than Athens. It cannot in a truly meaningful sense overcome the Greek sources as evidence. Instead it has to confront them on their own terrain, which has always privileged the cultural and the literary over the historical. They are ideologically charged standard-bearers of Western self-knowing, and so the “history” they purport to tell is sedimented within the ongoing quest for *Bildung*. The use of new tools in succeeding generations cannot disguise the repetitively constrained nature of the evidence.

I have made ancient Greek history sound like an emperor with no clothes (or at least with an old and limited wardrobe). So powerful is its modeling among practitioners that the new Achaemenid history, whatever its present or

⁸⁶ See A. W. Gomme, A. Andrewes, and K. J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945–1981); S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991–2008).

⁸⁷ Beard, “Which Thucydides Can You Trust?”; see also her provocative “Would It have Been Better Had some Surviving Works of Ancient Authors Been Lost?,” *Guardian Review* 25 Sept. 2010: 2.

future achievements, seems destined to remain reactive rather than proactive. The logic of this reading shows up the unspoken limitations of Pocock and Said (and the rest of us). Pocock cannot configure a dialogic model that escapes the world that publics and propagandists complain about and challenge. Said cannot escape his formation by the Western intellectual tradition, and so he is reduced to furnishing the grounds for complaint about and challenge to it.

What is to be done? Implicit in ancient Greek experience, and explicit in centuries of Western investigation of it, is an ideological understanding of sovereign value and of the tools required to reveal it. In historiography, as in much else, this world is parsed by a confident self-knowing (so confident, in fact, that it can interrogate itself). My own view is that this has led to a monocultural blindness, a Western view of the West that can permit alternative historical explanations because they literally do not count. In truth, these can be nothing more or less than the captive binary opposites of the regnant Western explanandum. For practitioners, publics and propagandists alike, the rules of the game allow variations on a theme but not subversion of the theme itself. In a world in which people can only explain their past to themselves by measuring it against what it understands to be oppressing them, there is neither oxygen nor release. The sunny uplands of the new Achaemenid history, or anything of that sort, still stand under the brooding shadows of what the West has made of its past.

XII

As I finished this paper I read Thomas Harrison's brand new book *Writing Ancient Persia*.⁸⁸ This short text, by a historian of ancient Greece, is at first glance a respectful survey of the rise of new Achaemenid history. A synoptic recounting of developments since the 1980s, it reflects upon how new Achaemenid histories "have been, are being, and might be, written."⁸⁹ However, closer reading reveals a familiar subtext. Harrison's agenda is subtly to reassert the centrality of the Greek narrative sources. This is done by employing the venerable academic tool of damning with faint praise. Achievement is noted, but new Achaemenid historians are severally guilty of stridency, positivism, or special pleading. Worst of all, in challenging Hellenocentrism they created their own founding counter-myth and have never progressed beyond it. The result implies an impending ossification. The unmistakable message is that the revolutionary march of new Achaemenid history has run its course.

A reaction (or even perhaps a *revanche*) was always predictable granted the vastly conflicted histories that lie at the core of this paper. Be that as it

⁸⁸ T. Harrison, *Writing Ancient Persia* (London: Bloomsbury for Bristol Classical Press, 2011).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

may, Harrison's book disappoints in another way as well. Its last chapter is entitled "Concluding Hostilities," and it ends by hoping that "the Persian wars, or at least their proxy scholarly conflict, might be drawn to some kind of conclusion."⁹⁰ That is to say, academic practitioners should concentrate on their own bailiwick and not concern themselves unduly with the worlds of publics and propagandists. It might be said that this is an all-too-familiar washing of hands that takes us back full circle to the issues with which this paper began.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.