Macaulay famously declared Thucydides to be “the greatest historian that ever lived.” This judgment reflects a good deal of partisan hyperbole, and quite a number of other historians ancient and modern might justify the claim, including Herodotus, Sima Qian, Ibn Khaldun, and Gibbon, but Thucydides is certainly the most difficult Greek historian to translate. Martin Hammond’s new English translation is the first since Steven Lattimore attempted to capture the full nuance and complexity of Thucydides’ prose without resort to excessive simplification or paraphrase. Indeed, to date Lattimore’s version is the only one that can stand comparison with Hobbes’ magisterial translation, which many other subsequent translators have raided for their own work. Given the importance of Thucydides for western historiography, whatever his international rank, another new English version is a signal event. Before I look more closely at the Hammond/Rhodes edition, let me say up front that I have no intention of comparing it closely with Robert B. Strassler’s Landmark Thucydides, now nearly fifteen years behind us. Whatever its virtues, and they are many, he chose to use Richard Crawley’s old 1874 translation with only light revision to avoid the time and cost of a fresh translation. Crawley tends to simplify the exceptional complexity of Thucydides’ speeches, while Lattimore confronts them with English that captures much of the difficulty. Crawley is

more successful in narrative passages, especially where Thucydides employs a matter-of-fact style that often rises to vivid, energetic descriptions of action. In testing Hammond’s translation, then, I will focus on how he handles a representative narrative episode and a section from a major speech. First, however, let’s survey the contents.

P. J. Rhodes’ contribution to the edition includes the forty-four-page introduction (pages ix–liii), the selective bibliography (liv–lvii), the detailed book-by-book summary and analysis (lviii–lxiv), the appendix of weights and measures (473–474), the 157-page explanatory notes (475–632), and (presumably) the notes on the Greek text (633–43). The authors take the Oxford Classical Text of H. Stuart Jones as their starting-point and then supply textual notes for those places where the text they translate differs from the OCT and for places where they accept OCT readings that some modern scholars do not: “Not all of these divergences have a significant effect on the sense or the detail, but where they do the textual issues are discussed in the Explanatory Notes” (633). Martin Hammond was responsible for the translation, most of the “decisions on which reading to adopt in the many places where the Greek text is in doubt” (page v), and the comprehensive sixty-four-page index (644–708). I assume that both Hammond and Rhodes worked together to assemble the notes on the Greek text, even if the former made most of the decisions on which readings to accept, and that both cooperated on selecting the sheaf of ten maps. All but two of the maps are in fact adapted from existing books by Rhodes, B. W. Henderson, J. F. Lazenby, K. J. Dover and Simon Hornblower. While the maps are not as rich and varied as those in the Landmark Thucydidies, they are adequate to follow the narrative.

Three aspects of this edition are, however, noteworthy. First, Rhodes’ introduction is one of the best I’ve ever read for the general reader. In forty-four crisp, concise pages, he manages to lay out the context to the war, to analyze the evolving military strategy from the Archidamian War
through its middle and final stages, to provide a short biography of Thucydides along with an account of the composition of his history, and to detail Thucydides’ historical methods and style. He concludes with a short prospectus of later Greek historians who followed Thucydides. The size of the introduction belies the breadth and variety of complex material Rhodes is able to deploy in a lucid exposition that stems from his long engagement with Thucydides. Second, the notes benefit from all the new research that has developed since the Landmark Thucydides, particularly from the commentary by Simon Hornblower, which is an essential accompaniment to A. W. Gomme’s monumental commentary as completed by Anthony Andrewes and K. J. Dover. Rhodes makes it clear that “These notes seek to help a range of readers, including readers without a great deal of background knowledge, to understand both Thucydides’ subject matter and his treatment of it” (475). Despite that caveat, the synthesis of material he offers is sufficiently diverse and varied—especially in the analysis of narrative—that it should prove useful to a broad range of readers, from students to professional historians. Finally, the translation is based on a fresh examination of the textual tradition. The ten pages of dense notes on the Greek text testify to the editors’ determination that this translation should come as close as possible to what Thucydides actually wrote. For that reason alone it has an advantage no other current translation, in or out of copyright, can match.

Most general readers and teachers will select this edition primarily for the translation and secondarily for the support material. I will test Hammond’s work by examining two passages that reflect opposing aspects of Thucydides’ style: his treatment of narrative and his treatment of speeches. A close comparison of the English with the Greek should show clearly how Hammond has tracked Thucydides’ very complex syntax.

Both passages come from Book 2. The narrative excerpt describes the Theban attack on Plataea in 431 BCE. The lit-
tle city of Plataea, Athens’ only ally at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, had always been hostile to Thebes, which concluded that the imminence of war gave it an opportunity to seize the city with a preemptive attack while peace still held. The Theban forces gained entry to the city at night, took up a position in the market square, and invited the city to join them in a Boiotian alliance. When the Plataeans learned that a Theban army was in their midst, they immediately made defensive preparations and decided to attack while it was night to take advantage of their familiarity with the city. The attack begins at 2.4.

Here is Thucydides’ account followed by Hammond’s translation. I have numbered the sentences in each passage.

As soon as the Thebans realized that they had fallen into a trap, they closed in on themselves and began to beat off the attacks wherever they came. Two or three times they drove the Plataeans back, but then as the onslaught continued with a huge din, joined by the women and slaves shouting and screaming from the roofs and pelting them with stones and tiles, and with heavy rain falling throughout the night, they panicked and turned to flee. They went running through the city, but the streets were dark and muddy (it was at the end of the month and there was no moon) and most had no idea of the routes to safety, whereas their pursuers knew how to prevent their escape: so the majority met their death. The only gate open was the one through which they had entered, but a Plataean secured it by ramming a spear-butt into the crossbar in place of the pin, so this exit too was now blocked. As they were chased through the city some of them climbed the wall and jumped down outside (most to their deaths), some found an unguarded gate where a woman gave them an axe and, unseen so far, they hacked through the crossbar and just a few of them got out before they were quickly discovered, and others were killed here and there throughout the city. The largest and most concerted group of them blundered into a big building which formed part of the city wall, and the door facing them happened to be open: they had thought this door was a gate giving direct access to the outside. When the Plataeans saw them trapped, they discussed whether they should set fire to the building and incinerate them where they were, or deal with them in some other way. In the end these Thebans and the other survivors still wandering up and down the city came to terms with the Plataeans, agreeing to surrender themselves and their weapons unconditionally. This then was how their enterprise turned out for the Thebans in Plataea.

This passage is almost a sentence-for-sentence translation of Greek with the exception of sentence 2, which is so long and complex that Hammond chose to break it into two English sentences, 2 and 3. He broke it right after the Thebans
panic, turn their backs, and flee. The break separated Thucydides’ compound verb ἐφοβήθησαν καὶ τραπόμενοι ἔφυγον from its following prepositional phrase, which then required a new verb (“They went running”) to maintain smooth continuity of action. He also made two other interpretive changes from the Greek: Thucydides only says that the night had become very wet, not that rain had fallen through the night, and that it was the end of the month and thus by implication the moon was waning, not that it was a moonless night. This is a perfectly reasonable compromise when confronted with complex Greek syntax and does produce much simpler, livelier English. It is of course quite possible to translate the whole of sentence 2 into semantically clear English, but its more highly structured English would also make higher demands on reader attention. Here is an example that is not dependent on Hobbes: “They beat them back two or three times, but then, when the Plataeans assaulted them with a great din joined by the shouts and cries of their wives and servants from the roofs as they hurled down stones and tiles, together with the night having been very wet, they were seized with terror and turning their backs fled through the city, most of them being ignorant in the dark and mud of the necessary routes to safety (for it was the waning of the moon), while their pursuers were acquainted with ways to prevent their escape, so the greatest part of them perished utterly.”

None of the other sentences is particularly long or difficult, and Hammond has done a good job with them while slightly modifying the Greek here and there for better clarity. In the first Greek sentence, the Thebans had not properly “fallen into a trap” since the participle ἐξηπατημένοι simply means “they were utterly deceived.” His rendition of the imperfect verb ἐξεπετρέφοντο, however, is somewhat less vivid than it might be. The literal meaning is “to twist up into a ball,” that is, to collect into a compact ball-like mass. Hobbes translates the verb as “cast themselves into a round figure,” which is the sort of painfully verbatim translation
that mistranslates the original. In his translation of sentences 3 and 4 of the Greek, Hammond effectively conveys the swift, energetic narrative that almost has an Herodotean feel about it. My only caveat would be with the verb phrase ἐρρίψαν ἐς τὸ ἐξοσμάς αὐτοὺς in sentence 4. The Thebans “threw themselves outside” rather than “jumped down outside,” which provides a less graphic explanation why most were killed (διεθορήσαν οἱ πλείους). Thucydides again uses the verb συστρέφω, “to twist up into a ball,” as a perfect middle-passive participle modified by ὁσον μάλλον in the fifth Greek sentence. Here Hammond blurs the visual metaphor when he translates it as “the most concerted group of them,” though “concerted” conveys the proper semantic sense. The main verb of the sentence, ἐσπιπτούσιν, is however brilliantly rendered by “blundered,” since the Greek means “to fall into, to rush or burst in” with a connotation of violence. He then turns the final clause, which begins with ὅσοιον ἔχουσιν (“thinking”)—the Thebans thought the door of a building was a gate leading directly outside—into a separate pluperfect sentence set off for emphasis by a colon. Greek participles carry much of the meaning in a sentence and are a constant headache when trying to find an English workaround. Hammond’s solution here is much more effective than Hobbes’, which gives us this: “the doors whereof, being open, they thought had been the gates of the city and that there had been a direct way through to the other side.” Hammond casts the remaining three sentences of the Greek, 6–8, into literal English that tracks the Greek syntax quite closely, although he compresses χρήσασθαι ὅτι ἀν ἔστω (“to do whatever they wished”) at the end of the seventh sentence into the adverb “unconditionally.”

Our second passage, 2.41, is one of the most famous sections from Pericles’ Funeral Oration. He delivered the oration in 431 BCE to honor those who had died in the early battles of the Peloponnesian War, praising Athens as the school of Greece, but quickly veering into his true purpose:
to argue that the defense of an empire maintained by naked power requires that all Athenians show the same willingness to suffer for the city as those who had already died. Once again I have numbered the sentences in both the Greek and English texts.


[1] ‘In summary, I declare that our city as a whole is an education to Greece; and in each individual among us I see combined the personal self-sufficiency to enjoy the widest range of experience and the ability to adapt with consummate grace and ease. [2] That this is no passing puff but factual reality is proved by the very power of the city: this character of ours built that power. [3] Athens alone among contemporary states surpasses her reputation when brought to the test: Athens alone gives the enemies who meet her no cause for chagrin at being worsted by such opponents, and the subjects of her empire no cause to complain of undeserving rulers. [4] Our power most certainly does not lack for witness: the proof is far and wide, and will make us the wonder of present and future generations. [5] We have no need of a Homer to sing our praises, or of any encomiast whose poetic version may have immediate appeal but then fall foul of the actual truth. [6] The fact is that we
have forced every sea and every land to be open to our enterprise, and everywhere we have established permanent memorials of both failure and success.

[7] ‘This then is the city for which these men fought and died. [8] They were nobly determined that she should not be lost: and all of us who survive should be willing to suffer for her.’

Unlike the narrative passage we have already considered, here Thucydides uses very complex syntax that is often difficult to construe and employs words whose connotations are often difficult to interpret. Chapter 2.41 comprises five sentences, of which sentence 4 is the longest and most convoluted, partly, I believe, for rhetorical emphasis. It is the heart of the whole passage and will bear close study. Hammond translates Greek sentences 1 and 2 with two English sentences, breaks Greek sentence 4 into three English sentences (4–6), and then splits Greek sentence 5 into two English sentences (7–8).

The first Greek sentence has been a major problem for all translators. The problem does not lie in the first clause, where Pericles calls Athens the school, or more properly the education, of Greece, but in the second where he turns to the individuals whose collective behavior represents the spirit of the city. The highly telescoped syntax requires considerable expansion in English. In the first half of the clause Pericles merely says that it seems to him each individual in his own person is disposed ἐπὶ πλεῖστ’ ἐν ἐξήν, which Hammond renders as “the widest range of experience.” The neuter plural noun ἔξην here can mean “actions or circumstances.” The whole phrase then would mean something like “the widest range of actions” or “the most varied circumstances.” The noun itself does not mean “experience,” which is Hammond’s interpretation. Other translators, like Hobbes and Jowett stick more closely to the semantic meaning of the noun. The second half of the clause is particularly resistant to translation. Each individual is disposed to this wide range of actions and dexterously exercises his ability with the utmost grace. The phrase τὸ σῶμα αὐτόρκες means “the ability or sufficiency to do something,” here the ability of each
Athenian to enjoy a wide range of experiences, while εὐφρατεῖα is an adverb whose core meaning is “dexterously.” Most translators turn the adverb into an adjective, as Hammond does with “ease,” but overall his paraphrase of the second clause is quite effective.

Greek sentences 2 and 3 are somewhat easier, with only the first presenting any difficult syntax to track. In the second, Hammond rearranged the Greek syntax rather freely to fashion fluent English. A literal translation would run something like this: “And that this is not a boast in words for the present occasion rather than the factual truth, the very power of the city, which we have acquired by these characteristics of ours, makes evident.” In order to get the main verb of the Greek sentence, σημαίνει, from its terminal position into a more normal English position, he first turned the prepositional phrase ἀπὸ τῶν τρόπων into a noun phrase as subject and then repeated “power” in a short, pithy conclusion highlighted by a colon: “this character of ours built that power.” Pericles does not say Athens “built” her power, only that she acquired it, but Hammond’s solution does have a strong rhetorical punch. The third Greek sentence consists of two clauses each introduced by the adjective μόνη (“she alone”). Pericles uses the bare intimate adjective to evoke the unity of the citizens and the city. I would, therefore, have preferred the simple adjective to Hammond’s dual “Athens alone,” although he otherwise follows the syntax with broad accuracy. The second clause in Greek is cast as a strong antithesis conveyed by strict syntactical parallelism, which Hammond follows roughly with some adjustment in the English syntax. He could have captured the antithesis with greater point. Here is a literal translation that does no violence to English: “she alone gives no indignation to the attacking enemy who suffers reverses by such [opponents] and no ground for complaint to the subject that he is ruled by the undeserving.”

Pericles rises to a climax in Greek sentence 4, emphasizing the great monuments Athens has left as testimony to her
power, a power that will be the wonder of future ages and
will need no Homer or panegyrics to exalt it falsely, because
Athens has forced every land and every sea open to her
valor. This long, complex sentence builds on the two previ-
ous ones. Athens acquired her power (δύναμις) through the
character of her citizens and has exercised it over enemies
and friends alike in a fashion that validates her reputation.
Now that power grows vast in the hearers’ imagination as
Pericles describes its sheer, brutal extension over space. The
climax then dies away into a coda memorializing those who
paid the price to force every land and every sea open to
Athenian aggression. Hammond breaks Greek sentence 4
into three English ones in the belief, I assume, that English
could not accommodate it whole and still maintain readabil-
ity. The price of truncating the Greek is a serious loss of se-
mantic and rhythmical coherence. The Greek sentence
consists of three syntactical blocks: the first is a long prepo-
sitional phrase that ends in the main verb θαυμάσασθομενον
(“we shall be a wonder”), the second is a dependent clause
introduced by the participle προσδεόμενοι (“having no
need”) that rejects Athens’ dependence on a Homer or an
encomiastic poet for potentially misleading praise of her ac-
complishments, and the third opens with the particle ἀλλά
to contrast the factual reality of those accomplishments,
marked by physical memorials planted everywhere, with
mere unreliable poetry. Other than the two verbs τέρψει
(“will delight”) and βλάψει (“will impair”) in the second
block, all the other verbs are participles. That leaves
θαυμάσασθομενον standing alone in splendid isolation; every-
thing that follows serves as a vindication of its accuracy.
Hammond’s division of this labyrinthine Greek is probably
inevitable given the nature of the contemporary reading pub-
lic. Aside from the strategic decision to trisect Greek sen-
tence 4, for better or worse, he’s done a particularly poor job
in English sentence 4, which corresponds to the first syntac-
tical block above. He has erased μετὰ μεγάλων δὲ σημεῖων
and replaced it with the flabby “the proof is far and wide”
while generally flattening Pericles’ rhetoric. He improves somewhat in sentence 5, though having Homer “sing our praises” is in context bathetic. In sentence 6, however, Hammond makes two semantic decisions that can be misleading. He translates τῆς ἡμετέρας τόλμης with “to our enterprise.”

The word τόλμη can mean “enterprise or undertaking,” but it also means “courage, boldness, valor, daring” and carries a connotation of over-boldness or recklessness. Here I think it clearly suggests the daring, courage and boldness of the Athenians in their imperial venture. A more serious problem is the way he has rendered μνημεία κακῶν τε καγαθῶν αἰώνα with “permanent memorials of both failure and success.” I seriously doubt this is what Pericles meant; one does not plant monuments to failure, only success. The phrase κακῶν τε καγαθῶν surely refers to monuments “of the evil [we have done our enemies] and the good [we have done our friends],” a simple restatement of the common Greek mos maiorum to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies. Having extracted himself from Greek sentence 4, he concludes by splitting sentence 5 into two English ones, 7 and 8. There is no justification for this at all. It’s important to keep the two clauses of the Greek closely connected, with the first memorializing those who have died in defense of the city and the second calling for those who are left to undergo any toil on her behalf.

Taking all these issues into account, it is surely possible to translate Greek sentence 4 without any serious loss of English coherence or lucidity: “To present and future generations we shall be a wonder by demonstrating a power that is certainly not without the testimony of its mighty signs, which need neither a Homer’s praise nor anyone else whose poetry may for the moment delight, though the truth will later mar its representation of the facts, for we have forced every sea and every land open to our daring and have everywhere planted eternal monuments of the evil done enemies and the good done friends.”
THE TWO passages I have chosen for close analysis show the often intractable problems facing the translator of Thucydides. In 2.4 and throughout the narrative passages, Hammond remains close to the Greek and translates with fidelity, often sentence-by-sentence. In 2.41 and the other speeches, he generally breaks the longer, more tortuous Greek into several English sentences for the sake of a smoother, if simplified, flow. On balance, I regard this translation as the most accurate and readable we now have, if one tending toward a mild domesticating approach. For those who want the rigor of a foreignizing version, Lattimore will be first choice. The addition of Rhodes’ introduction and notes along with Hammond’s highly detailed index in a cheap, compact edition makes their edition the only choice for a serious reading of Thucydides.

NOTES

1. The Peloponnesian War, translated with introduction and notes by Steven Lattimore (Indianapolis 1998).
