

#### LOVERS OF LIES OR THE SCEPTIC

same effect as the dog, and the other man suffers the same fears. So it seems that you yourself, having been bitten by a host of lies at Eucrates' house, have passed on the bite to me too: you've filled my soul with such a lot of spirits!

- t. Well, cheer up, my friend: we have a strong antidote to such things in truth and sound reason applied everywhere; and if we stick to that none of these empty, futile lies will ever disturb us.

Lucian

#### HOW TO WRITE HISTORY

THIS treatise of Lucian's has a special interest as it is the most extensive surviving work from antiquity on the theory of historiography. However, it is not a general treatment of the subject as the title might suggest, as Lucian is specifically addressing would-be historians of a particular event, the war in Parthia of 162-6. This was triggered by the invasion of Armenia by the Parthian king, Vologeses III. The co-emperors of Rome at the time were Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus: a large Roman army was dispatched under the command of Lucius Verus, and the Parthians were eventually defeated.

Lucian devotes the first part of his essay to stringent and satiric criticism of the host of petty historians who hastily produced histories of this war, and by liberal quotation he exposes their glaring faults (e.g. slavish imitation of their great models, Herodotus and Thucydides). He then turns (33 ff.) to constructive advice on the writing of such a monograph, in which he stresses the essential qualities of mind and the appropriate narrative style of the genuinely successful historian whose work deserves to last.

The work can be dated securely to 166, as Lucian refers (31) to the triumph which was due to take place later that year. The addressee Philo is unknown, but it is a reasonable guess that he too was planning to write an account of the war.

There is a story, my dear Philo, that the people of Abdera, when Lysimachus\* was king, were afflicted by a disease which took the following course. First, they all suffered from a fever which was violent and persistent from the beginning; about the seventh day the fever left them, causing some to have a heavy nose-bleed and others to be drenched in a heavy sweat. But it affected their minds in a most ridiculous way: they all got madly excited about tragedy, and created an uproar by declaiming iambics. They generally sang solo songs from Euripides' *Andromeda*, performing Perseus' speech as a song, and the city was full of these seventh-day tragedians, all pale and thin, shouting out

O Love, you rule o'er gods and men,\*

and all the rest in a piercing voice, over and over again, until winter and a sharp frost put an end to their gibberish. I think the actor Archelaus was the cause of this behaviour. He was popular at that

time, and in the blazing heat of midsummer he had acted the *Andromeda* for them, so that most of them came away from the theatre in a fever, and when they recovered from it they then relapsed into tragedy. The *Andromeda* kept haunting their memory, and Perseus with Medusa still flew around in their minds.

2 To make a comparison, as they say, that affliction of the Abderites has now got a grip on most of the educated world. They don't strike tragic poses—they would be less half-witted if they were possessed by other men's quite respectable iambs. The truth is, ever since the present disturbances began—the war against the barbarians, the serious set-back in Armenia, and the series of victories—every individual is writing history: or rather I should say, we see them all playing at being Thucydides and Herodotus and Xenophon. There does seem to be truth in that saying, 'War is the father of all things',\* since at one stroke it has produced so many historians.

3 Well, my friend, as I was noticing and listening to all this, I thought of that story about the man of Sinope.\* When Philip was reported to be already approaching,\* the Corinthians were all in a turmoil of activity, preparing weaponry, collecting stones, strengthening part of their wall, underpinning a battlement, everyone involved in some useful task. When Diogenes saw this, as he had nothing to do (no one was making use of him), he girded on his old cloak and all on his own he energetically rolled the wine-jar, in which he happened to be living, up and down Craneion.\* Asked by one of his friends, 'Why are you doing this, Diogenes?', he replied, 'I'm rolling my wine-jar so that I don't seem to be the only idle man in all this bustle of activity.'

4 So I too, Philo, don't want to be the only voiceless man at such a loquacious time, roaming about like an extra in comedy, open-mouthed but silent; so I thought it expedient to roll my own wine-jar as well as I can. I'm not rash enough to write a history or record men's actual deeds: never fear that I would do that. I know the danger if you roll it over the cliff, especially a badly baked little jar like mine. It only has to hit a small bit of rock and you'll be gathering up its broken pieces.

So, I'll tell you what I've decided, and how I'll manage to take part in the war safely and keeping out of the line of fire. I shall be wise to stay away 'from this billowing spray',\* and all the historian's worries. And I shall offer a bit of advice and these few suggestions to historians, so I can share in the construction of their edifice, if not in

the inscription on it, by touching the mortar at least with the tip of my finger.

And yet most of them don't think they need any advice for their task, any more than they need a treatise to tell them how to walk or to see or to eat, believing that writing history is perfectly easy and straightforward, and anyone can do it if he can just give expression to what comes into his head. But I am sure you understand, my friend, that history is not something that can be easily organized or assembled without effort. As much as any other work of literature it needs careful thought, if it is to become, in Thucydides' words, 'a possession for ever'.\* Now, I'm aware that I shall not convert many of them, and that to some I shall seem an awful nuisance, especially those who have finished their history and by now have given it a public hearing. Furthermore, if they were then praised by the audience, it would be mad to expect such writers to change or rewrite anything which has once been ratified and stored, as it were, in the palace archives. Still, it's not a bad idea to address them as well, so that if another war took place—Celts against Getes or Indians against Bactrians (for no one would dare to attack *us* as we've now beaten everybody)—they may compose better histories by applying this standard, assuming they agree that it is the right one. If not, they'll just have to measure their work by the same yardstick as they do now. The doctor won't be grieving greatly if all the Abderites go on wanting to declaim the *Andromeda*.

The function of advice is twofold, telling you both what to choose and what to avoid. Let us first say what the historian should avoid, and particularly from what faults he must stay free. Then, by what means he can ensure that he does not miss the right path that leads straight ahead: what sort of beginning he must make, how he must order his material, the right proportion for each section, what should be omitted, what dwelt on at length and what passed over summarily, and how to express and fit it all together.

I'll deal with these and similar points later. But now let us talk about the faults that result from slipshod writing. Now, to go through those errors which are common to all types of writing and involve diction, rhythm, thought, and other aspects of poor technique, would take a long time and not be appropriate to this enquiry. For as I said, they are errors common to all writing; but regarding faults in writing history, you will find, if you attend carefully, that they are the sort that I have often found when listening to recitations, especially if you

keep your ears open to all those people. But meanwhile, it won't be inappropriate to mention by way of example some of the existing histories which show these faults.

First, let us consider this outstanding failing, that most of them don't worry about recording events, but spend their time praising rulers and generals, applauding their own side to the skies and denigrating the enemy quite unreasonably. They don't understand that the line that separates and marks off history from panegyric is no narrow isthmus, but there is a great wall between them; or to express it in musical terms, the interval is equal to a double octave. For the panegyrist is only concerned with giving all the praise and pleasure he can to the man he is praising, and doesn't much mind even if he has to lie to succeed in his object. History, on the other hand, cannot tolerate introducing a lie, even for a moment, any more than doctors say the windpipe can endure anything swallowed into it.

8 Next, such writers seem to be unaware that the principles and rules of history are different from those of poetry and poems. With the latter freedom is unalloyed and there is one law—the will of the poet. He is inspired and possessed by the Muses, and if he chooses to yoke winged horses to a chariot, or to make some people run over water or even the tops of corn, nobody complains. Not even when their Zeus draws up land and sea together dangling from a single rope, are they afraid it will snap and everything fall and shatter to bits.\* If they choose to praise Agamemnon, there's no one to stop him having a head and eyes like Zeus, a chest like Zeus' brother Poseidon, and a belt like Ares: in short, the son of Atreus and Aerope has to be a mixture of all the gods, for neither Zeus nor Poseidon nor Ares alone can fully express his beauty. But if history brings in flattery like that, what else is it but a kind of prose-poetry, without poetry's grandeur of style, but otherwise displaying its love of marvels, without metre and on that account more conspicuously? So it is a great blemish, indeed an overwhelming one, not to know how to distinguish the essential features of history and of poetry, and to introduce the adornments of poetry into history—fable and eulogy and the exaggerations inherent in these. That is like dressing one of your tough, rugged athletes in a purple robe and the other adornments of a courtesan and daubing his face with powder and rouge. Good gracious! How ridiculous you would make him, degrading him with all that ornamentation.

9 I am not saying that praise is not sometimes appropriate in history. But there is a right time for it and it should be practised

in moderation, so as not to irritate future readers. On the whole, you should exercise judgment in this area with an eye to posterity, and I will deal with it a little later.

There are those who think that they can make a fair distinction between two elements in history, the pleasurable and the useful, and on that account introduce eulogy into it because that will give their readers pleasure and enjoyment. But you see how far they have missed the truth? Firstly, they are using a bogus distinction, since history has one function and one aim, to be useful, and that derives from truth alone. Pleasure is an advantage if it is present as an incidental feature, like beauty in an athlete. But if not, there's nothing to prevent Nicostratus,\* the son of Isidotus, a high-class performer and a better fighter than his two rivals, from becoming a second Heracles, however ugly he is, while his opponent is the handsome Alcaeus of Miletus, reportedly the lover of Nicostratus. So too, if history stooped to dealing in pleasure as well, it would attract many lovers; but as long as it sticks to dealing fully with what is its own preserve—I mean revealing the truth—it won't be much concerned with beauty of style.

Again, it is worth saying that if history includes what is totally 10 fictitious, or praise that is notably hostile to one side, the audience derives no pleasure from it, if you think not of all the vulgar rabble, but of those who will listen judiciously, and indeed those who are looking for faults as well. Nothing will escape their notice: they are more keen-sighted than Argus,\* with eyes all over their body: and they test everything that is said like a money-changer, instantly rejecting anything counterfeit, but accepting what is genuine and legal and correctly minted. You must keep your eye on these people when you are writing, paying scant attention to the others, even if they burst themselves applauding you. If you ignore them, and season your history unreasonably with fictions and eulogies and other sorts of flattery, you'll very soon make it look like Heracles in Lydia.\* You must have seen him portrayed as a slave to Omphale, dressed in a most extraordinary fashion, while she is wearing his lion's skin and holding his club. She is Heracles, you see, and he is clad in saffron and purple, carding wool and getting slapped with Omphale's sandal. It's a truly shameful sight: his clothes don't fit and fall off him, and a god's masculinity has become shockingly effeminate.

Perhaps the masses will actually praise you for this; but the few you 11 despise will be delighted and laugh their heads off, when they see

how incongruous, ill-proportioned, and loose-textured the work is. For each section has its own particular beauty, and if you alter that it becomes ugly and pointless. I don't have to say that eulogies may please one person, the subject of them, but be irritating to others, especially if they involve overblown exaggerations of the sort that most people produce when they are courting the favour of those they are praising, and going on and on until their fawning is obvious to all. They show no skill in doing this, and don't conceal the flattery, as they rush full tilt, piling on all sorts of transparently unbelievable stuff.

12 The result is they don't even achieve what they really want: those they are courting hate them all the more and rightly reject them as toadies, especially if they are of a manly temper. For instance, Aristoboulos\* included in his history the fight between Alexander and Porus, and made a point of reading this passage to Alexander, thinking he would greatly gratify the king by falsely attributing acts of prowess to him, and by inventing deeds far surpassing the truth. At the time they were sailing on the river Hydaspes, and Alexander took the book and flung it straight into the water, saying, 'That's what you deserve too, Aristoboulos, for fighting such single-handed combats on my behalf, and killing elephants with a single spear-cast.' In fact, Alexander was bound to be annoyed at this, seeing that he had not tolerated the audacity of the engineer who had undertaken to make Athos into a statue of the king by reshaping the mountain into his likeness. He saw at once that the man was a flatterer, and stopped employing him even on other business as before.\*

13 So, where is the pleasure in all this, unless someone is so completely brainless as to enjoy praise which can be instantly shown to be false? Consider how ugly people, especially women, urge painters to make them appear as beautiful as possible, thinking that their own looks will improve if the painter adorns them with a deeper pink and mixes plenty of white in his colours.

That's what many historians today are doing, cultivating their own interest and the benefit they hope to derive from their history. You could well hate them for being obvious but unskilled flatterers for the present moment, and for the future bringing their whole trade into disrepute by their exaggerations. If anyone thinks that pleasure must at all events be an element in history, there are other forms of an elegant style by which pleasure can be combined with truth. But most writers ignore these, and keep bringing on stage things which have no relevance.

14 Let me tell you what I heard from some historians the other day in Ionia, and indeed just recently in Achaea, when they were narrating this very war. And by the Graces, let no one disbelieve what I'm about to say: I should have sworn it's true if it had been seemly to put an oath in a written treatise. One of them began at once with the Muses, calling upon the goddesses to lend him a hand with the work. You see how apt this opening was, how fitting for a history, how appropriate for this type of literature! Then, a bit later he compared our general to Achilles and the Persian king to Thersites,\* not realizing that his Achilles would have been a better man if he had killed Hector rather than Thersites, and if it was a valiant man who was fleeing ahead

and a far greater man pursuing.\*

Next he added some praise of himself, how worthy he was to recount such glorious exploits. Coming towards the end, he praised his native Miletus as well, adding that he was improving on Homer, who never mentioned his native country. Then, finishing his introduction, he promised clearly and explicitly to extol our side, and to do all he could personally to vanquish the foreigners. Then he began his account by giving the causes of the war like this: 'That abominable villain Vologeses began the war for the following reason.'

15 So much for him. Another was a keen imitator of Thucydides, so that he slavishly copied his model, and like Thucydides began with his own name—the most charming of all openings, fragrant with Attic thyme. Consider it: 'Crepereius Calpurnianus of Pompeiopolis\* wrote the history of the war between the Parthians and the Romans, starting at its very beginning.' After such a beginning, need I carry on?—the kind of speech he reported in Armenia, introducing the Corcyrean orator in person to give it; the sort of plague he inflicted on the people of Nisibis who refused to join the Romans, which he copied entirely from Thucydides, only omitting references to the Pelasgians and the Long Walls, where those who had then caught the plague were living. For the rest, he also made it 'originate in Ethiopia' and 'move down into Egypt and much of the territory of the king of Persia', where it happily stayed.\* Well, I left him still burying the unfortunate Athenians at Nisibis, and went away knowing exactly what he was going to say after I'd gone. Again, you see this is now pretty well the fashion, to imagine that you are reproducing Thucydides' style if, with some minor changes, you copy his phraseology. And, I nearly forgot to say that this same historian has

described many kinds of arms and engines of war by their Roman names, as also the words for ditch and bridge and so on. You can just imagine the noble character of his history, and how fitting it is for Thucydides to have these Italian words mixed up with Attic ones, like a conspicuous addition of purple adornment, and a perfect harmony!

16 Another one has put together a bare record of events, and written it down in a completely flat and prosaic style, as if a soldier had composed it as a diary, or maybe a carpenter or camp sutler. However, this amateur was at least less pretentious: it was at once clear what he was up to, and he has done the preliminary work for another more elegant and talented historian to take over. My only criticism was that his book-titles are more bombastic than suits the likely fate of his writings: 'History of the Parthian War, by Callimorphus, doctor for the sixth regiment of lancers', followed by the number of each book. And my goodness, wasn't his preface terribly frigid, which argued thus: that it was appropriate for a doctor to write history, since Asclepius was the son of Apollo, and Apollo was leader of the Muses and chieftain over all culture. I also disliked his practice of beginning to write in Ionic,\* and then for some unknown reason suddenly switching to the vernacular, continuing to write the Ionic forms of 'medicine', 'attempt', 'how many', and 'diseases', but otherwise words in ordinary everyday use and generally the sort you hear at street corners.

17 If I have to mention a philosopher, his name must be concealed, but I'll tell you about his opinion and what he wrote recently in Corinth, which exceeded all expectation. At the very beginning, in the first sentence of his preface, he fired a series of questions at his readers in his eagerness to put forward an over-clever argument: that only a philosopher should write history. Shortly after that came another syllogism, then another. In short, his preface revealed every type of syllogistic questioning; the flattery was nauseating, the eulogies vulgar and quite ribald, and they too were not free of syllogistic conclusions. I really did think it vulgar, and not at all worthy of a philosopher with a long grey beard, to assert in his preface that it would be a real privilege for our commander that even philosophers now think it worth their while to record his exploits. That sort of remark it would be more seemly for us, if anyone, to think of, rather  
18 than for him to say it. Again, it wouldn't be right not to mention the historian who began thus: 'I am going to speak of Romans and Persians', and shortly afterwards, 'The Persians were doomed to

suffer disaster'; and again, 'It was Osroes, whom the Greeks call Oxyrhoes',\* and many other examples like that. Do you understand? He resembled Crepereius, though he was a slavish imitator of Herodotus, as the other was of Thucydides.

Another, famous for his forceful style, also resembled Thucydides 19 or even went one better, describing all cities, mountains, plains, and rivers to clarify and reinforce his narrative, or so he thought. May the god who averts evil turn this style of his against our enemies, so frigid was it, colder than Caspian snow and Celtic ice! For instance, he took nearly a whole book to describe the emperor's shield, with the Gorgon on its boss, and her eyes of blue and white and black, and her girdle like a rainbow, and her curls formed of coiling and clustering snakes. As for Vologeses'\* trousers, or the bit on his horse, Heavens! what thousands of words were devoted to each, and to Osroes' hair as he swam the Tigris, and the cave where he took refuge, which was completely overshadowed by a tangle of ivy and myrtle and bay. Do observe how essential these details are to history: without them we wouldn't know anything of what happened there.

They take refuge in this sort of description of landscape and caves, 20 because they are weak in the essential points or ignorant about what should be said. And when they happen on a lot of major events they are like a newly enriched servant, who has just become heir to his master, and doesn't know how to dress or how to eat his dinner decently. Instead, he wades in greedily, when perhaps poultry and pork and hares are set before him, and stuffs himself with soups or salt fish until he bursts from eating. Well, this writer I just mentioned described quite unbelievable wounds and outlandish deaths: how someone was wounded in the big toe and died immediately; and how Priscus the general only had to give a loud shout and twenty-seven of the enemy fell dead. Furthermore, when giving the number of those killed, his false report even went against the generals' dispatches. By his account, there were 70,236 of the enemy killed at Europus, compared with two Romans killed and nine wounded. I don't think anyone in his right mind would accept that.

I should also mention another point, which is not a trivial one. 21 Because this man is a committed Atticist and has purified his speech even to the tiniest details, he thought it right to change the Roman names and alter them to Greek forms; saying, for example, Kronios for Saturninus, Phrontis for Fronto, Titanios for Titianus, and other much sillier forms. Furthermore, this same writer, when dealing with

the death of Severianus,\* declared that all the others had been deceived in thinking he was killed by the sword, as he had died from voluntary fasting, believing this to be the most painless form of death. The writer did not know that his sufferings lasted in all three days, I believe, while most people who abstain from food can survive for up to a week—unless you imagine that Osroes stood around waiting for Severianus to die of starvation, and therefore didn't attack for a week.

22 And what is one to make of those, my dear Philo, who use poetical words in their histories, like 'Round whirled the crane and mightily fell the wall with a crash', and again in another section of this estimable history, 'Thus was Edessa girdled with the clatter of arms, and naught was there but clanging and din'; and 'Long pondered the general how best to assail the wall'. Then in the middle of all this, he crammed in a heap of words that are cheap, trivial, and beggarly: 'The commander sent a message to the lord'; and 'The soldiers bought the needful'; and 'They'd had a wash before they concerned themselves with them'; and so on. Such a performance is like a tragic actor wearing the high boot of tragedy on one foot and a sandal on the other.

23 And then you'll see others writing prefaces which are brilliant, stately, and inordinately long, leading you to expect to hear a really marvellous narrative to follow. But the main body of their history is such a petty and paltry production, it seems like a small child—perhaps you've seen a Cupid at play, wearing a huge mask of Heracles or a Titan. Anyway, the audience's comment comes at once: 'The mountain was in labour.'\*

This is not in my view the right technique: there should be uniformity throughout, with evenness of tone and harmony between the rest of the body and the head, so that you don't get a golden helmet coupled with an utterly ridiculous breastplate cobbled together out of rags or rotten leather, and a shield of wickerwork and greaves covered in pigskin. You can see lots of writers like that, who stick the head of the Colossus of Rhodes on a dwarf's body; and others again who produce headless bodies, books without a preface that launch straight into the narrative of events. These claim Xenophon as a colleague, because he starts with the words 'Darius and Parysatis had two sons',\* and other old authors, not realizing that some passages are effectively prefaces, though most people don't notice it. We shall deal with this elsewhere.

Still, we can put up with all this, so far as it concerns faults of style and organization of topics; but when it comes to getting localities wrong, not just by parasangs but even by whole days' journeys, can you see any distinguished model for that? For instance, one writer was so careless in assembling his facts, never having met a Syrian or, as they say, listened to barber-shop gossip, that in talking about Europus he said, 'Europus is situated in Mesopotamia, two days' journey from the Euphrates: it was a colony of Edessa.'\* Nor did he stop there: in the same book this distinguished writer lifted my own native city Samosata, acropolis, walls and all, and placed it in Mesopotamia, with both rivers flowing round it, passing close on each side and all but lapping the wall. What a ridiculous idea, Philo, that I should have to defend myself to you from the charge of being a Parthian or Mesopotamian, where this admirable historian has settled me!

And, my goodness, that was a really credible story the same writer told about Severianus, swearing that he'd heard it from one of the survivors of the actual event. He said Severianus did not wish to die by the sword, nor drink poison, nor hang himself, but he devised a dramatic way of dying, which was both strange and daring. He chanced to have some very large goblets of the finest crystal, and when he had decided that death was inevitable, he broke the largest cup and used one of the fragments to cut his throat with the glass. Could he really not have found a dagger or spear to give himself a manly and heroic death? Then, as Thucydides had reported a funeral oration for the first to die in that celebrated war,\* he thought he too ought to say something over Severianus. For they all vie with Thucydides, though he had no responsibility whatever for the troubles in Armenia. So, having buried Severianus in fine style, he has a centurion, one Afranius Silo, climb onto the tomb as a rival to Pericles. This man declaimed over him in such a strange and overblown way, that, by the Graces, I couldn't stop crying with laughter, especially when Afranius the orator at the end of his speech burst into tears, and with passionate groans reminded us of all those lavish dinners and toasts. Then he capped it all by acting like Ajax:\* he drew his sword, and with the absolute nobility befitting an Afranius he killed himself on the tomb in view of everyone—and by the god of war he deserved to die long before for making a speech like that. The writer went on to say that all the onlookers were astonished and praised Afranius to the skies. As for me, I condemned him overall for all but telling us about the soups and the shell-fish, and crying over

the memory of the cakes; but most of all I blamed him for dying before he had first slaughtered the historian who had stage-managed the show.

27 I could recount many other writers like these, my friend, but I'll mention just a few, and then proceed to my other design of suggesting how one could write history better. There are some who omit or just deal cursorily with major and memorable events, and, lacking professionalism, good taste, and the knowledge of what should be mentioned and what passed over, spend ages on detailed and laborious descriptions of the most trivial things. It's as if someone didn't observe or praise or describe for those who do not know it all the supreme beauty of the Zeus at Olympia,\* but admired the careful workmanship and the fine finish of his footstool, and the well-proportioned base, and concentrated hard on all these details.

28 For example, I heard one of them race through the battle at Europus in under seven complete lines; but he took twenty or even more measures of the water-clock in a boring and irrelevant narrative about a Moorish horseman, named Mausacas. This man was wandering over the mountains, suffering from thirst, when he came across some Syrian peasants laying out their lunch. At first they were afraid of him, but learning that he was a friend they welcomed him to their meal; for it happened that one of them had travelled abroad to Mauretania, as he had a brother on military service in that country. There followed long stories and narratives; how he had been hunting in Mauretania, and how he had seen a lot of elephants grazing together, and how he had nearly been eaten by a lion, and the size of the fish he bought in Caesarea. And this impressive historian ignored the massacres and charges and enforced truces and garrisons and counter-garrisons at Europus, and well into the evening he stood watching Malchion the Syrian buying huge wrasses cheap in Caesarea. If night hadn't come on he might have been sharing his dinner of cooked wrasse. If all this had not been carefully included in the history, we should never have known some important things, and the loss would have been unbearable to the Romans if Mausacas the Moor hadn't found a drink when he was thirsty, but returned to the camp without his supper. But here I am now leaving out other much more essential items: how a music-girl arrived from the nearby village; how they exchanged gifts, the Moor giving Malchion a spear, and Malchion giving Mausacas a buckle; and all the many such crowning achievements of the battle at Europus! So, all in all, you

could reasonably say that such writers don't look at the rose itself, but take careful note of the thorns that appear by its root.

Another writer, Philo, is also utterly ridiculous. He had never set 29 foot out of Corinth or even gone to Cenchreae, and never seen Syria or Armenia; yet he started off with these words, as I recall: 'The ears are more untrustworthy than the eyes,\* so I am writing what I have seen, not what I have heard.' And he had seen everything so clearly that, referring to the serpents of the Parthians (an ensign they use for a body of troops: I think a serpent leads a thousand men), he said they were alive and enormous, and born in Persia a short distance beyond Iberia; that they are tied to long poles and lifted up high to frighten the enemy from a distance, as the Parthians approach, but during the actual encounter at close quarters they are set free and let loose upon the foe; that they had actually swallowed many of our men in this way, and coiling themselves around others had choked and crushed them. He said he himself had been present and seen all this—though he had made his observations from the safety of a tall tree. He was wise not to approach the beasts, or we wouldn't now have such a marvellous historian, who casually performed great and glorious feats in this war. For he encountered many dangers and was wounded at Sura—no doubt while taking a stroll from Craneion to Lerna.\* All this he read to an audience of Corinthians, who knew perfectly well that he had never even seen a wall-painting of a battle. Indeed, he didn't even know what armour and siege-engines looked like, or the terms 'battle-array' or 'muster-rolls'. A fat lot it mattered to him if he called an army in column an extended front, and confused movements 'in line' and 'in column'.

One superb historian compressed all the events that took place 30 from start to finish in Armenia, Syria, Mesopotamia, by the Tigris, in Media, into under five hundred lines; and having done this claims he has written a history. Yet his title is almost longer than the book: 'An account of the recent achievements of the Romans in Armenia, Mesopotamia and Media, by Antiochianus, victor in the games of Apollo'—I suppose he'd once won the boys' long-distance race.

There's one I've heard of who even included the future in his 31 account: the capture of Vologeses, the killing of Osroes—how he would be thrown to the lion, and to crown it all the triumph we long for so much—so oracular was he as he rushed to finish his work. In fact, he has even founded a city in Mesopotamia of enormous size and

outstanding beauty. He is still pondering and deliberating whether to name it Nicaea, after the victory,\* or Harmony or Peaceful. There's no decision yet, and we lack a name for that beautiful city, which is full of so much waffle and historical drivel. He has now promised to write about the future of India, and the circumnavigation of the outer sea: and this is not only a promise, as the preface to his 'History of India' is already written, and the third legion with the Celts and a small division of Moors under Cassius have all crossed the river Indus. What they will achieve, or how they are going to withstand the charge of the elephants, our distinguished historian will soon tell us by letter from Muziris or the Oxydraci.\*

32 Such a heap of rubbish do they talk through their lack of culture, not seeing what is worth seeing, and not able, if they did see it, to describe it suitably. Instead, they contrive and invent whatever comes to an ill-timed tongue, as they say;\* and they pride themselves on the number of their books, and especially on their titles. These too are utterly silly: 'So-and-so's Parthian Victories in so many books'; and again, 'First and Second Parthis' (like 'Atthis',\* you see). Another one wrote rather more elegantly (I've read it), 'The Parthonica of Demetrius of Sagalassus'. I am not just mocking and making fun of such excellent histories, but I have a practical purpose. Whoever can avoid these and similar faults has made a big advance towards correct historical writing, or rather he needs to acquire only a little more, if it is a valid argument that if you remove one of two opposites you necessarily establish the other.

33 Well then, someone may say, the ground has been carefully cleared and all the thorns and brambles chopped out, and all the rubbish carried away, and all the rough areas made smooth: so you must now build something yourself, to show that you are good not only at knocking down other people's constructions, but at devising something clever yourself, such that nobody, not even Momus,\* would criticize.

34 My own view, then, is that the best historian comes naturally endowed with these two supreme qualities, an insight into statecraft and powers of expression. The former cannot be taught and is a gift of nature; powers of expression should be acquired by constant practice, unremitting toil, and imitation of the ancients. So these need no rules and no advice from me: my treatise does not claim to make people intelligent and sharp who are not naturally so. It would be worth a lot—everything indeed—if it could convert and refashion

things to such a degree, or produce gold from lead or silver from tin, or create a Titormus from a Conon or a Milo from a Leotrophides.\*

So, where is there a place for rules and advice? Not to create 35 qualities, but to show the appropriate use of them. Thus, for example, Iccus, Herodicus, Theon, and other trainers would not promise you to take Perdicas—if it was he and not Antiochus, son of Seleucus,\* who fell in love with his stepmother, and wasted away because of this—and make him into an Olympic victor and a match for Theagenes the Thasian or Polydamas of Scotussa.\* But if they were given raw material naturally adapted for athletic exercises, they would greatly improve him by their training. So let me too not suffer any ill-will due to my claim to have discovered a technique for dealing with such an important and difficult activity. I do not claim to be able to take just anyone and produce an historian, but to show one who is naturally intelligent and well practised in using language some straight paths (if indeed they seem to be such) by which he can more quickly and easily achieve his goal. After all, you wouldn't say that an 36 intelligent man does not need training and instruction in things he doesn't know: otherwise, he would strum the lyre and play on the pipe and grasp everything without learning it. In fact, he couldn't practise any of these without learning; but with someone to show him, he can very easily learn and practise them well by himself.

So, let us now have a student like this, not dim in intelligence 37 and self-expression, but sharp-sighted and capable of dealing with practical matters if entrusted with them; one with the mind of a soldier as well as of a citizen, and an acquaintance with generalship; and yes indeed, one who has at some time been in a camp, and seen soldiers training or in battle-array, and has some knowledge of arms and siege-engines, and knows the meaning of the terms 'in line' and 'in column', and how infantry and cavalry are deployed, and the origin and meaning of 'lead out' and 'drive round': in a word, not an armchair expert or one who has to rely on what he is told.

But the most important thing by far is that he should be a free 38 spirit, fear nobody, and expect nothing: otherwise, he will be like corrupt jurymen, who sell judgments to win favour or gratify enmity. It should not matter to him that Philip's eye was put out by Aster of Amphipolis,\* the archer at Olynthus: he is to be portrayed just as he was. Nor should he worry that Alexander will be angry if he describes clearly how Cleitus was brutally murdered at the banquet.\* Nor will Cleon,\* with all his influence in the Assembly and his power over the



speaker's platform, scare him off saying he was a dangerous madman; nor indeed the whole of Athens stop him narrating the disaster in Sicily,\* the capture of Demosthenes, the death of Nicias, how parched the soldiers were, and the sort of water they drank, and how many of them were slaughtered as they drank. For he will be quite right to think that no sensible person will blame him for recording actions which are unlucky or stupid: after all, he was not responsible for them, but simply reported them. So if they are defeated at sea, he isn't the one who sinks them, and if they are put to flight, he isn't the one pursuing them—unless he forgot to put in a seasonable prayer on their behalf. Indeed, if by omitting or reversing the facts he could have put them right, it would have been very easy for Thucydides with one fragile pen to overturn the cross-wall at Epipolae and sink Hermocrates' trireme, to transfix that abominable Gylippus as he was blockading the roads with walls and ditches, and finally to throw the Syracusans into the quarries, while the Athenians sailed round Sicily and Italy as Alcibiades had originally hoped. But my belief is that when actions are finished and done with, not even Clotho the Spinner can unspin them nor Atropos the Unchanging\* change them back.

39 The single task of the historian is to tell of things as they happened. But he cannot do this as long as, being Artaxerxes' doctor,\* he is afraid of him, or is hoping for a purple cloak, a gold collar, and a Nisaeon horse as a reward for praising him in his work. Xenophon, an impartial historian, won't do that, nor will Thucydides. On the other hand, even if he personally hates certain people, he will regard himself as much more constrained by the public interest, and put truth above enmity. So too, if he has a friend involved, he won't spare him if he is doing wrong. As I said, this is the peculiar characteristic of history: if you are going to write history you must sacrifice to truth alone, ignoring everything else. In short, your one clear rule and yardstick is to keep your eye not on your present audience, but on those who will come to your work in the future.

40 Whoever courts the present will rightly be considered a flatterer: history has rejected such people right from the very beginning, no less than athletic training has rejected personal adornment. For instance, Alexander is quoted as saying, 'When I'm dead I should like to come back to life for a while, Onesicritus,\* in order to find out how men will then be reading these events. If they now praise and welcome them, don't be surprised: they are all thinking that this is no mean bait to win my favour.' It's true that Homer generally treated Achilles

in a fictional fashion; but nowadays some people tend to believe him, adducing as the one important proof of his truthfulness the fact that Achilles was not alive when he wrote about him: they cannot see any motive for his telling lies.

Well, my historian should be like that: fearless, incorruptible, frank, 41 a friend of free speech and the truth, determined, as the comic poet\* puts it, to call figs figs and a tub a tub, indulging neither hatred nor friendship, sparing nobody, not showing pity or shame or diffidence, an unbiased judge, kindly to everyone up to the point of not allowing one side more than it deserves, a stranger without a state in his writings, independent, serving no king, not taking into account what any man will think, but simply saying what happened.

Thucydides did very well in establishing this rule, and he distinguished 42 virtue from vice in the writing of history when he saw Herodotus so much admired that his books were named after the Muses. For he says he is writing a possession for ever, rather than a prize-composition for the present occasion, and that he does not favour fabulous elements, but is leaving for posterity a true account of what happened. He also mentions the question of usefulness, and what any sensible person would assume to be the purpose of history, that if ever again people are faced with a similar situation, taking due notice of the records of past events they can, he says, deal competently with the present.\*

So, please let the historian come equipped with that cast of mind. 43 With regard to his language and power of expression, he should not set about his work with a mind sharpened to achieve that biting vigour, which has endless periods and intricate logic and all the other trappings of forceful rhetoric. Rather he should settle for a more tranquil effect; his thinking should be coherent and shrewd; and his diction clear and practical, so as to display his subject-matter as vividly as possible.

For just as we have established freedom of speech and truth as the 44 aims for the historian's mind, so the single first aim for his language is to clarify and explain the subject-matter as lucidly as he can, using words which are neither esoteric and out of the way, nor the vulgar language of the market-place, but such as ordinary people understand and the educated approve. In addition, the work may be decorated with figures that won't give offence and above all seem unforced, or he'll be turning out language that resembles highly spiced sauces.

- 45 His mind should also have a share in and a feel for the poetic, inasmuch as that too offers an element which is elevated and sublime, especially when he is involved with battle-lines and land and sea fights. For then he will need a poetic wind to waft his boat along and help to keep it riding the crest of the waves. Yet his diction should keep its feet on the ground, rising to match as far as possible the beauty and grandeur of his topics, but without becoming more exotic or high-flown than suits the occasion. For then it runs the risk of getting wildly excited and caught up in the frenzy of poetry; so that at those times most of all he should obey the curb and exercise self-control, knowing that getting on your high horse is not a trivial fault even in literature. So, it is better that while his mind is on horseback his language should run along beside him, holding on to the saddle-cloth so as not to fall behind.
- 46 Furthermore, he should practise temperance and moderation when arranging words, not separating and detaching them too much, which produces harshness, or (as many do) virtually linking them together through rhythm. The latter is to be censured, the former is disagreeable to the audience.
- 47 Regarding the actual details of events, he should not just collect them haphazardly, but only after careful, painstaking, and repeated enquiry. Ideally, he should have witnessed them himself; but failing that, he should rely on the least biased informants and those least likely to suppress or add anything to the facts through favour or ill-will. At this stage, he must show a capacity to arrive at and put together the more credible account of things. And when he has collected all or most of the facts, he should first organize them in note form, and produce a text which is still unadorned and not completely articulated. After that he must put them into order, and add beauty, and embellish them by means of diction, figures, and rhythm.
- 49 In a word, he must then be like Zeus in Homer, looking now at the land of the horse-rearing Thracians, now at that of the Mysians.\* He too must similarly take his own individual look now at the actions of the Romans, and explain how they seemed to him from on high, and now at those of the Persians, then at both sides if they start fighting. In a pitched battle itself he should not look at one single area or any individual cavalryman or infantryman—unless it is a Brasidas leaping forward, or a Demosthenes beating back his attack;\* but first of all at the generals, having also listened to their exhortations (if any), and the method, plan, and intention of their deployments. When the battle

starts, he should keep an overall view and weigh the events as in a balance, and join in both the pursuit and the rout. He must handle all this with moderation, showing an easy detachment without being extravagant, vulgar, or naive. Let him pause at some points, and move from here to there if necessary; then up sticks and back again if events there call him. He should always be moving quickly, following the order of events so far as possible; he must fly from Armenia to Media, and from there in one swoop to Iberia; and then to Italy, so as not to miss any crisis.

Most important, he must apply his mind like a mirror which is clear, gleaming, and sharply focused, he must display the facts in accordance with the form of them he receives, and with no trace of distortion, false colours, or alteration. Historians do not write on the same terms as orators: what they have to say is in front of them and will be said, because it has already happened, their task being to organize and formulate it. So what is required is not what to say but how to say it. In short, we must think of comparing the historian with Pheidias or Praxiteles or Alcamenes or some other sculptor. They certainly did not create their own gold or ivory or whatever other material, but had it ready to hand, supplied by the Eleans or the Athenians or the Argives; their job was to give it form, sawing and polishing the ivory, and glueing, shaping, and gilding it, and they showed their skill in the proper treatment of their material.

Well, the task of the historian is something like that: to arrange events artistically and to exert all his powers to make them vivid. And when one of his audience, after having heard him, thinks that he can visualize what is being described and praises him, then indeed the work of this Pheidias of history has been perfectly crafted, and has won the praise it deserves.

Now, when he has assembled all his materials he will sometimes begin even without a preface, if his theme does not strictly require any preliminary treatment in a preface. But even then he will use a virtual preface to explain his subject.

When he does have a preface, he will start with two points only, not three like the orators. Omitting the request for goodwill, he will give his hearers what will hold their attention and offer them instruction; they will attend to him if he shows that he is going to discuss topics that are important or vital or personal or useful. And he will make what follows instructive and clear if he sets out the causes in advance and summarizes the main episodes. The best historians have prefaces

of this type: Herodotus writing 'so that events will not be forgotten in the passage of time',\* the great and marvellous account of victorious Greeks and defeated barbarians; and Thucydides, believing that his war would be great and more important and worth recording than any previous ones—and indeed it produced tremendous sufferings.

55 After the preface, long or short as suits the subject matter, the transition to the narrative should be easy and unforced. For the whole body of the history is in effect a long narrative. So it should be adorned with virtues suitable to narrative, moving along smoothly, steadily, and consistently, without bulges or gaps. Then it should have a surface clarity which is achieved by diction, as I said, and by the inter-connection of events. He will make every section separate and complete, and when he has worked out the first he will bring in the second, linked and attached to it like a chain, avoiding interruptions and a long series of adjacent narratives. The first and second themes must always not just lie side by side, but overlap with shared material at the edges.

56 Rapidity is always helpful, especially if there is no lack of material, and this should arise from the subject matter rather than from words or phrases: I mean, by passing rapidly over trivial and less important things, but dealing adequately with major issues. Indeed, many details should even be left out. When you are giving your friends a dinner and everything is prepared, you don't in the midst of all your pastries, poultry, shell-fish, wild boar, hares, and tunny, also offer them salt-fish and pea-soup just because it's available too: you'll ignore the cheaper stuff.

57 There is particular need of moderation in descriptions of mountains, fortifications, and rivers, so that you don't seem to be giving a vulgar display of your facility with words, and neglecting the history in favour of your own interests. You can touch on them briefly when you need to and for the sake of clarity, but then move on, avoiding the seductions of the subject, and all such self-indulgence. This you can see in Homer's practice, in his lofty-minded way: though a poet he passes rapidly by Tantalus, Ixion, Tityus\* and the others. But if Parthenius or Euphorion or Callimachus\* were telling the story, you can imagine how many words he would have taken to bring the water to Tantalus' lips; how many to set Ixion spinning round! Certainly Thucydides wastes few words on this sort of passage: observe how quickly he moves on from describing a siege-engine, or explaining an essential and useful method of attacking a city, or the plan of

Epipolae, or the harbour of Syracuse. On the other hand, when he seems to be tedious in his account of the plague, you must think of the facts and you'll realize how rapid he actually is, and how the plethora of details holds him back as he tries to escape.

If someone must be brought in to make a speech, it is most important that his language suits his character and his subject, and these also should be made as clear as possible. However, on these occasions you are allowed to act the orator and display your oratorical powers. 58

Praise and blame should be carefully considered and circumspect, free from calumny, supported by evidence, delivered quickly and not ill-timed, as those concerned are not in court, and you will face the same charge as Theopompus,\* who uttered quarrelsome accusations against most people, making such a practice of it that he appeared to be a prosecutor rather than historian. 59

Again, if a myth happens to arise, you must record it but not believe it totally: set it out for your audience to make their own conjectures about it. You yourself should run no risks by leaning to one side or the other. 60

On the whole, I ask you to remember this—and I shall keep on repeating it: don't only write with an eye to the present, hoping that the present generation will praise and honour you. You should aim at eternity, writing for posterity and claiming payment for your book from them; so that it can be said of you: 'He was a free man, totally frank in his speech, untouched by flattery or servility, showing truthfulness in everything.' Any sensible man would rate that above all present hopes, seeing how short-lived they are. 61

You know about the achievement of that architect from Cnidos?\* He built the tower in Pharos, the largest and most splendid of all works, so that it might send a beacon-light to sailors far over the sea, and stop them being driven on to Paraetonia, a very dangerous spot, they say, from which there is no escape once you hit the reefs. Well, when he had finished the building, he wrote his own name on the stonework inside, plastered it over with gypsum, and having thus concealed it wrote over it the name of the reigning king. He knew (which indeed happened) that after a very short time the letters would fall off with the plaster, revealing 'Sostratus of Cnidos, son of Dexiphanes, to the saviour gods, on behalf of those who sail.' In this way not even he was looking to the immediate present or his own brief lifetime, but forward to our time and to eternity, as long as the tower stands and his skill survives. 62

63 Well, that is the spirit in which history should be written: with truthfulness and a regard for future hopes, rather than with flattery aimed at getting pleasure out of present praise. Here is your rule and standard for writing impartial history. If any will make use of it, that is all to the good, and my work has served its purpose. If not, I've rolled my wine-jar in Craneion.

## A TRUE HISTORY

THIS is probably Lucian's best known work, and it is his most extended exercise in parody. We see his gift for parody also in *Lovers of Lies*, and in *A True History* there is the same malicious wit in poking fun at his victims. At that period there was clearly a vogue for travel tales which were full of wildly fabulous and fantastic elements: these are Lucian's chief targets, and he singles out by name the travel writer Iambulus for criticism. But he also attacks the historians Ctesias and incidentally Herodotus for telling lies in their works. By contrast, he overtly admits that there are fantastic lies in his own travel tale, but claims at least to tell the truth in saying that his narrative is false. The ninth-century scholar Photius correctly saw the nature of Lucian's work, but his suggestion that Antonius Diogenes' *Wonders beyond Thule* was an important source of *A True History* is difficult to assess, partly because of the uncertainty about Diogenes' dates.

Some of Lucian's familiar literary and philosophical preoccupations recur here: there are, for example, sardonic references to Plato and Pythagoras (2. 17, 21, 24), and at greater length he gives us evidence (2. 20) of contemporary interest in Homer and Homeric scholarship.

## Book I

Those who are interested in athletics and the care of their bodies are 1  
concerned not just with keeping themselves in good condition and  
well exercised, but with timely relaxation: indeed, they regard this as  
the most important part of training. In the same way, I think it does  
students of literature good, after hard and serious reading, to relax  
their minds and invigorate them further for future efforts. It would 2  
be suitable recreation for them to occupy themselves with the kind  
of reading which not only affords simple diversion derived from  
elegance and wit, but also supplies some intellectual food for  
thought—just the qualities I think they will find in this work of mine.  
For they will be attracted not only by the exotic subject-matter and  
the charm of the enterprise, and by the fact that I have told all manner  
of lies persuasively and plausibly, but because all the details in my  
narrative are an amusing and covert allusion to certain poets, his-  
torians, and philosophers of old, who have written a lot of miraculous  
and fabulous stuff. I would give their names if they weren't bound  
to be obvious to you as you read. For example, there is Ctesias,\* son 3  
of Ctesiochus, of Cnidos, who wrote about India and details of the