

1-1-2002

The nightingale sings anew: The appropriation of antiquity in Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/wgu6-ygq5>

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THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS ANEW: THE APPROPRIATION
OF ANTIQUITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
THE WAVES

by

Neta Luree Hoff

Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 2002**

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14 November, 2002

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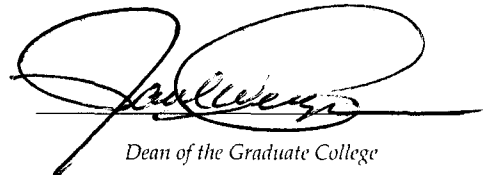
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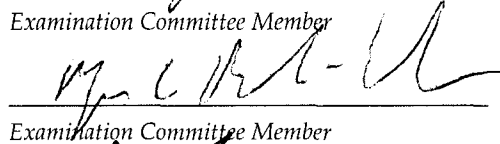
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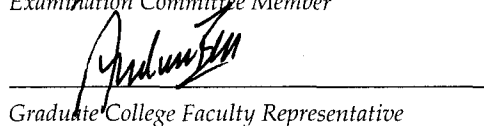
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ABSTRACT

**The Nightingale Sings Anew: The Appropriation
of Antiquity in Virginia Woolf's
The Waves**

by

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This thesis considers the impact of classical antiquity on the literary aesthetic of Virginia Woolf by focusing on the educational and theoretical assumptions that allowed Woolf to create her most experimental work, The Waves. Inspired by her brother Thoby Stephen and her tutor Janet Case, Woolf enjoyed a very strong and fertile relationship with the writers of antiquity, and she continued to return to them throughout her life for both conceptual and structural models. In her essays on the Greeks in particular, Woolf praises the ancients for achieving those things that she so longs to see accomplished in the works of the Moderns, especially their true representation of character and their exploration of the psychological. Her appropriation of Greek drama, Greek and Latin philosophy, and Latin neoteric poetry in The Waves, however, suggests more than mere appreciation. Woolf also clearly valued them as instruments for realizing her own aesthetic vision.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the patience and encouragement of my committee; I have very much appreciated their faith in me, especially that of Dr. Andrew Bell, who introduced me to the ancients and tutored me in both Latin and (briefly) Greek, and Dr. Philip Rusche, who encouraged me to trust my own scholarly instincts. In addition, to my advisor, Dr. Beth Rosenberg, I owe particular thanks. Without the hours she devoted to both me and this project, I simply cannot imagine how I could have accomplished what I did. It was she furthermore who in large part inspired my work on Virginia Woolf and the classics in the first place.

Dr. Evelyn Gajowski and Dr. Mike Stitt deserve my gratitude as well. I am grateful to the former for all the time and effort she invested in trying to make me a better scholar. She, too, made this project possible. The latter I thank for treating me as both a colleague and a friend. I have similarly benefited a great deal from the patient friendliness and advice of Dr. Charles Whitney and Allison Bredlau, the English Department's Administrative Assistant to the Graduate Program.

Thanks also go out to my brother Raymond Young, my good friend Emily Raba, and my children, Vaun, Tammra, and Nikoli. Their contribution to this work, although not easily articulated in a few short lines, was nonetheless invaluable. Suffice it to say that they gave me the intellectual space (the room of my own, if you will), the incredible motivation, and--in Vaun's case--even practical suggestions, without which I would have given up long ago.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the most intelligent, most self-sacrificing, and most inspiring person I know: my mom, Ruth Alonso. It was no doubt her great love of learning which gave birth to my own; for that, and much more, I thank her with all my heart.

INTRODUCTION

As an admirer of the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity, I began this study as an appreciation of the classical echoes in Virginia Woolf's The Waves. Over the last year or so, however, I have come to recognize Woolf as an author in her own right, whose deep understanding and acceptance of the classics enabled her to experiment with language and form in a way that few authors before the twentieth century had even dreamed of. I now understand that, like many other writers of her generation, Woolf, too, sought to create a new literary aesthetic that would differentiate her works from those of her predecessors and that could answer the visionary needs of the poet or novelist living in the perplexing Modern world. In essays such as "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she articulates these needs and suggests what the Modern writer might do to answer them. Essentially, she insists that the Modernists must utterly abandon the tradition of writing handed down to them by the authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course, despite her insistence on breaking away from the models and methods of the past, Woolf and her peers clearly drew inspiration from an even more traditional source--the literature of the ancients.

For Woolf, this acceptance of the ancients came naturally. An education in the classics reaching back into early childhood provided her with an understanding of the basic structural and conceptual foundations from which these works had sprung, and the many positive associations this education held for her taught Woolf to embrace rather than to reject them as she had her immediate literary forefathers. In fact, she used them, both through allusion and outright appropriation of content and form, in even the most experimental of her novels not only to help her create the distinctively non-linear narratives that characterize her work but also to establish a point of reference to guide her readers

through those very same narratives. Considering the aesthetic implications of Woolf's engagement with the classics, then, it would clearly be a mistake for Woolf scholars to ignore the influence of classical antiquity on this author and her work. Nonetheless, although critics have dwelt extensively on Woolf's high Modern aestheticism and even the feminist assumptions that seem to inform many of the author's classical references, scholarship on Woolf and the classics still remains surprisingly scarce, with, as far as I can determine, only one book and no more than a handful of articles addressing the topic.

I offer my investigation of The Waves (along with a consideration of the biographical and aesthetic factors that made the appropriation of the ancients in that work possible) as a supplement to this slowly growing body of research. By doing so, I hope that other Modernist scholars may see how important the classics were to the aesthetic theories and experiments of Virginia Woolf, and why, as Woolf critic William Herman puts it, Woolf should be placed with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound as part "of the High Classical Moment of early 20th century literature in English" (266). I would also like to encourage scholars of not only Modernism but also antiquity to observe that Woolf's feminism clearly did not necessitate the rejection of a strong classical tradition. Instead, as an author, she saw the ancients as a source of both inspiration and power. Any resentment she might have expressed in relationship to authors such as Vergil, Horace, or the Greek playwrights arose not from a distaste for the authors themselves or the literary tradition they represent, but from exasperation at their being withheld from entire segments of society simply because of gender or class distinctions.

I propose as my thesis for the following investigation that, in her struggle to overcome this inequity, Woolf herself acquired the potent conceptual models that would allow her to create The Waves, one of the true masterpieces of Modern literature. In my first chapter, I attempt to clarify how extensive and fertile Woolf's education in classical antiquity actually was by exploring her relationship with the two figures she most associated with the classics: her Greek tutor, Janet Case, and her brother Thoby Stephen.

In Chapter II, I examine what influence the study of Roman and Greek authors had on Modernist aesthetics in general and on Woolf's own theory of aesthetics in particular. Finally, in Chapter III, I dwell on how the author's appropriation of antiquity lends itself so neatly to the splendid achievement of her most innovative work, The Waves.

CHAPTER I

AMBIVALENCE AND ALLUSION: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S CONVERSATIONS ON CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Only recently have critics begun to give serious consideration to what effects Virginia Woolf's study of classical antiquity had on the development of her aesthetic vision.¹ Woolf's preoccupation with classical literature, however, is undeniable. Numerous diary entries and pages and pages of unpublished reading notes (responding to, for example, the works of Euripides, Homer, Vergil, and Juvenal)² demonstrate the author's ongoing engagement with the ancients, and her essays on the Greeks in particular stand as a testament to her intimate knowledge and appreciation of their art. Although for the most part denied a university education, Woolf not only studied both Latin and Greek, eventually even achieving proficiency in the latter, but also found herself continuously surrounded by intellectuals steeped in classical scholarship. Forced by this constant exposure to come to terms with the classics in her own writing, Woolf could not help but view the study of antiquity with some ambivalence. She valued the classics themselves as necessary foundational knowledge, yet her own studies were motivated by emotional as much as intellectual reasons. While resenting the elitist and sexist assumptions that prevented her from attending Oxford or Cambridge as her brother Thoby did, Woolf also felt a strong desire to share in his intellectual experiences and to take part in the conversations to which he, on account of his education, classical or otherwise, had unlimited access. This struggle between the sentimental associations the classics held for her and the memories of exclusion they inevitably inspired finds expression throughout Woolf's canon. It appears in the young classical scholars hauntingly reminiscent of her

brother Thoby and in the fact that the knowledge of Greek and Latin texts in her works represents both academic accomplishment and frustration.

In both her novels and essays, Woolf tends to use classical scholarship as a sort of “gendered trope” (McNeillie 9). Only men, she seems to say again and again, enjoy admittance into the privileged realm of the ancients.³ Nonetheless, it is now clear that Woolf herself had access to the works of antiquity as far back as early childhood when she received Latin lessons from her mother, Julia. Of course, her real immersion into the classics did not occur until age fifteen when, under the tutelage of George Warr at the King’s College Ladies department, she added Greek to her curriculum. Other Greek scholars followed Warr, including in 1899 Clara Pater, the sister of well-known art historian and critic, Walter Pater, and the study of this language and its literature came to occupy a permanent position in Virginia Stephen’s intellectual endeavors. While not always completely satisfying,⁴ her studies provided an emotional outlet, or, as Woolf herself puts it in *A Sketch of the Past*, an escape from “the pressures of Victorian society” (*Moments* 127). However, these first teachers apparently failed to instill in their headstrong pupil a respect for the intricacies of Greek grammar; they left that task to “Cambridge-trained classicist” Janet Case, with whom young Miss Stephen began to study in 1902 (Lee 141).

According to Hermione Lee, Case “had a profound intellectual influence on Virginia Stephen. Her vigorous, unsentimental teaching of the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, her severity and clarity, and her ‘fine human sympathy’ (sketched in an essay of 1903) were attributes gratefully admired” (141-42). Case motivated Stephen in a way that the other teachers had not by catering to her student’s interest in the theoretical issues of the literature they were translating. During their lessons, the writers of antiquity came alive for Stephen through discussions of both character and style. In the 1903 sketch of Miss Case mentioned by Lee, a youthful Virginia Stephen does praise her instructor as “more professional than Miss Pater” and she describes Case’s insistence on building strong

grammatical “foundations,” yet this seems to be the least of what she admires about Miss Case’s teaching methods (Passionate Apprentice 182-83). She also appreciates the other woman’s willingness to listen to a student’s thoughts on the Furies and to set forth strong opinions of her own, and she enjoys Case’s insistence on finding both beauty and a moral in the works of the ancients. As Stephen looks back at her instructor’s presentation of the ancients, she observes,

She was always expounding their “teaching” and their views upon life & fate, as they can be interpreted by an intelligent reader. I had never attempted anything of this kind before, & though I protested that Miss Case carried it too far, yet I was forced to think more than I had done hitherto & [was] interested accordingly. It was upon these subjects that she became really eloquent. (183)

Case gave Virginia Stephen a new way of looking at the classics. Rather than presenting the works of Euripides and Aeschylus as mere exercises in translation, she asked her student to interpret what these writers had to say about universal concerns such as “life & fate.” Unsurprisingly, Case’s enthusiasm inspired in Miss Stephen not just interest, but admiration as well.

These conversations with Miss Case also provided Virginia Woolf with the language and the insight to talk intelligently and persuasively in her own commentaries on the classics. We see this in her 1917 review “The Perfect Language” where, although impressed by The Loeb Classical Library’s Greek Anthology, Woolf confidently declares, “Of course, no translation, as Mr Paton [the translator] would probably be the first to agree, is going to reproduce the bloom and scent, the natural poise and sequence, all that we feel before we understand the meaning of the original words” (Essays II, 115). Having studied Greek herself for many years, Woolf understands the shortcomings of translation, and she has been given enough preparation to recognize and discuss the subtlety of the texts in the original Greek. Thus she notes the importance of word order and the “feel” of the poetry

itself. Such things, she maintains, add to the perfection of the language. While she may appreciate the accessibility of the translation, she knows exactly what has been lost. Woolf's 1925 essay "On Not Knowing Greek,"⁵ despite its title, conveys a similar confidence in its discussion of not only the language but also the content of the Greek classics. Commenting on the intensity of Sophocles' *Electra*, for instance, Woolf explains that

it is not so easy to decide what it is that gives these cries of *Electra* in her anguish their power to cut and wound and excite. It is partly that we know her, that we have picked up from little turns and twists of the dialogue hints of her character, of her appearance, which, characteristically, she neglected; of something suffering in her, outraged and stimulated to its utmost stretch of capacity, yet, as she herself knows ('my behaviour is unseemly and becomes me ill'), blunted and debased by the horror of her position, an unwed girl made to witness her mother's vileness and denounce it in loud, almost vulgar, clamour to the world at large. It is partly, too, that we know in the same way that *Clytemnestra* is no unmitigated villainess. 'deinon to tiktein estin,' she says--'there is a strange power in motherhood'. It is no murderess, violent and unredeemed, whom *Orestes* kills within the house, and *Electra* bids him utterly destroy-- 'Strike again.' (CR 26-27)

Woolf's words at the beginning of this passage suggest an indecision unjustified by what follows. Regardless of the supposed hesitancy of her reading, she demonstrates an intimate familiarity with the text and has no difficulty exploring the motivations of its principle players. She even captures the unsettling ambiguity of the heroine's position. Clearly, her lessons with Miss Case armed Woolf with the ability to interpret the meaning of Sophocles' play through the analysis of his characters' speech and action. Essentially, Case made her pupil into a critic of the ancients, not simply an impassive observer. With

this in mind, Virginia Stephen's new-found interest in the Greek article under Miss Case seems a happy but inevitable consequence of a student's desire to please an inspiring and devoted teacher.

In addition to their intellectual relationship, there came to exist between the two women a strong and enduring emotional attachment, which Woolf makes clear in the moving eulogy she wrote for Case just after her death in 1937:⁶ "The death of Janet Case last Thursday," Woolf begins, "will bring back to many of her old pupils the memory of a rare teacher and of a remarkable woman" (Alley 298). For Woolf, Case offered more than other tutors because, as demanding as she was, she approached her students as unique individuals, even tailoring her lessons to fit their needs. Woolf voices appreciation for a teacher who valued her students as much as they learned to value her. Thinking perhaps of her own last moments with this "remarkable woman," she concludes that "to sit by her side when she knew that death was near was to be taught once more a last lesson, in gaiety, courage, and love" (300). Little wonder, then, one finds in Woolf's later personal writings that, in addition to inspiring her student with a passion for the beauty and rigors of the Greek language, Case also somehow managed simultaneously to shape Woolf as a novelist. "And how I loved her, at Hyde Pk Gate," Woolf declares in the 19 July 1937 entry of her diary after completing her tribute to Miss Case, "& how great a visionary part she has played in my life, till the visionary became a part of the fictitious, not of the real life" (*Diary* V, 103). Case gave Woolf the background in antiquity she needed to become a great writer of fiction, a writer unhindered by ignorance of the foundational texts of the Western Canon. As Virginia Stephen says in an early essay addressing an attack on the woman novelist, "It is, at any rate, possible that the widening of her intelligence by means of education and study of the Greek and Latin classics may give her that sterner view of literature which will make an artist of her, so that, having blurted out her message somewhat formlessly, she will in due time fashion it into permanent artistic shape" (*Essays* I, 16). Stephen recognizes here the importance of classical learning to the creation of a

well-rounded and complete aesthetic. Perhaps this is why, when Woolf collected her essays into the first Common Reader, the essay “On Not Knowing Greek” received such a privileged position--third out of 26. For all her later insistence on the necessity of literary “mothers” rather than “fathers” for female writers,⁷ she knew that as a novelist she actually would need her classical “fathers.” By opening up for Virginia Stephen the privileged learning of antiquity, Case prepared Virginia Woolf for her career as a novelist.

Furthermore, thanks in large part, one imagines, to her inspiring teacher, Woolf still spoke fondly of her study of Greek language and literature even twenty and thirty years later. In a diary entry dated 3 November 1923, for example, she writes, “After 20 years, I now know how to read Greek quick (with a crib in one hand) & with pleasure” (Diary II, 273). In another dated 29 October 1934, she speaks of reading Sophocles’ Antigone: “How powerful that spell is still--Greek. Thank heaven I learnt it young--an emotion different from any other. I will read Plotinus: Herodotus: Homer I think” (Diary IV, 257). Woolf clearly pursued her studies with some zeal even after she no longer had the benefit of lessons with Miss Case. Having learned the value of the classics early on, Woolf continued her investigation of Greek language and literature all her life and received a great deal of satisfaction from it.

Although Case’s influence explains Woolf’s eventual devotion to her studies in classical antiquity, most critics agree that it was her desire to communicate as an equal with her brother Thoby that motivated Woolf’s interest in the first place. She felt the need to learn Greek and Latin simply to stay connected with him as he immersed himself in scholarship at Cambridge and later when he invited his old school chums to join him on his Thursday nights at the Stephen siblings’ home in Bloomsbury. While Virginia Stephen acquired from Miss Case plenty of “ammunition for her discussion with Thoby,” as Lee puts it (142), the associations Thoby had in his sister’s mind with classical learning in general and Greek studies in particular went beyond these conversations between the two of them. She worshipped him as an older brother and, when he went off to school, valued

him as her link to the outside world. It was he, after all, “who first told [her]--handing it on as something worth knowing--about the Greeks” (*Moments* 108). Through her brother Thoby, Virginia Stephen came to think of the classics as something she, too, could know and enjoy. Consequently, even long after his tragic and untimely death, links between Thoby, classical studies, and even Greece itself (which the four Stephen children toured just before Thoby’s death in 1906) would appear in Woolf’s fiction to reflect, among other things, the mixed emotions she had toward her brother and his scholarly opportunities. Probably the most eloquent suggestion of these links occurs in *The Waves*;⁸ however, for a less elusive articulation of the relationship, one should probably turn to *Jacob’s Room*.

Few, if any, would dispute that Woolf alludes to her brother in this work. If nothing else, the Catullan epigram that came to Woolf’s mind as she finished up the novel seems pretty conclusive:

Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale

Julian Thoby Stephen

(1880-1906)

Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale. (Lee 227)⁹

Despite the very real preference Woolf had for her “magical Greek,” she follows Tennyson here in drawing consolation after the death of her brother from the Latin poet Catullus. Evidently, his words somehow speak to her loss. Hermione Lee’s assertion, moreover, that, at Thoby’s death, “Virginia took refuge in the impersonal consolations of Lucretius and Keats” indicates more than a passing interest in the Latins (228). And, indeed, when she sought to articulate her aesthetic preoccupations in the 1925 essay “Modern Fiction,”¹⁰ it was again to the striking imagery of Latin poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius that Woolf turned. In any case, while the references in Woolf’s literary cannon to the Roman writers do not at first glance seem to have the same emotional suggestiveness as those to Greece and the Greeks, the diary (and apparently letters)¹¹ of Virginia Stephen shows us that she did at least for a while engage in Latin translations with Thoby:

Rather a lazy morning, as I didn't have to write. So I read a bit of Latin the Georgics, instead--stately & melodious; but without the vitality of my dear old Greeks. However, there is a charm in Latin, which haunts one. Even that little bit of Virgil with T. in the summer, when I was hardly able to use my brains, brought a sense of harmony into them, such as for many months they had not known; & therefore I don't forget it. (PA 238)

This diary entry of 1905 shows Virginia Stephen's strong appreciation for Latin literature, and her reference to Thoby ("T.") and the cathartic results of their work together helps one to see the positive association that this language, like Greek, probably had for Woolf throughout her life. Accordingly, when confronted with the loss of her brother, she found it only natural to turn to the Romans for comfort; her allusion to Catullus after finishing Jacob's Room suggests that she continued to do so even long after his death.

Obviously, Woolf's brother held a prominent place in her thoughts during the writing of Jacob's Room. But the Latin epigram is not the only indication of Thoby's presence in the novel. In fact, as Sue Roe declares in her edition of the text, it is "Thoby, on whose character [Woolf] undoubtedly drew for Jacob Flanders," the novel's protagonist (xvii). Like Thoby, for example, Jacob attends Trinity College at Cambridge, where he studies the classics,¹² and his various intellectual conversations on literature, especially that of the ancients, appear to indicate his growth as a scholar. Before long, he pursues such conversations for the pure delight of flaunting his intellectual prowess, however undeveloped it may still be. At one point, for instance, after Jacob suggests to his friend Jimmy Durrant a discussion "about something sensible," the narrator reports,

The Greeks--yes, that was what they talked about--how when all's said and done, when one's rinsed one's mouth with every literature in the world...it's the flavour of Greek that remains. Durrant quoted Aeschylus--Jacob Sophocles. It is true that no Greek could have understood or professor refrained from pointing out--Never mind; what is Greek for if

not to be shouted on Haverstock Hill in the dawn? Moreover, Durrant never listened to Sophocles, nor Jacob to Aeschylus. They were boastful, triumphant; it seemed to both that they had read every book in the world; known every sin, passion, and joy. Civilizations stood round them like flowers ready for picking. (Jacob's Room 63-64)

Jacob and Durrant celebrate themselves in this passage. Bursting with confidence in their own intellectual abilities, they strut about quoting the Greek playwrights and ignoring the possibility that they know less than they suppose. They have been both mentally and emotionally empowered by their education. Their ignorance therefore does not really matter; their bold assertiveness more than compensates. Because they believe they have the world at their feet, they do. Furthermore, when Jacob joyfully declares, "Probably...we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant" (64), he implies the existence of a bond between himself and Jimmy Durrant. To some extent, his confidence surely springs from this sense of camaraderie. Surrounded by fellow scholars, Jacob need not struggle for answers on his own. Uncertain of the source of an ancient passage he is struggling to remember, for example, he has only to call on his friend Bonamy so that, between the two of them, they can find that it belongs to Lucretius rather than Vergil (58). Their common experience creates an intimacy between them that excludes all non-intellectuals. This is why, longing to make connection with Jacob, Fanny Elmer (one of Jacob's admirers) decides that she will "learn Latin and read Virgil" (106). She can think of no other way to reach him. Ironically, the plan of this pathetic girl calls to mind the author's own youthful desire to find a place for herself within her brother's circle of friends. Jacob, Durrant, and Bonamy relate to one another in a way Fanny can never understand because she does not have their educational opportunities.

Not surprisingly, fear of failure to achieve this same scholarly growth that Jacob takes for granted once plagued the novel's author as she watched her brothers leave home for university while she stayed behind to learn from tutors or was regulated to private

lessons at the ladies department of a lesser college. Dwelling on Jacob's privileged access to higher education, particularly an education in antiquity, throughout, the narrator also perhaps implies how the intellectual stimulation Thoby Stephen received at Cambridge might have given him an outlook very different from that of his sister:

A strange thing--when you come to think of it--this love of Greek, flourishing in such obscurity, distorted, discouraged, yet leaping out, all of a sudden....Jacob knew no more Greek than served him to stumble through a play. Of ancient history he knew nothing. However, as he tramped into London it seemed to him that they [he and his companion, Durrant] were making the flagstones ring on the road to the Acropolis, and that if Socrates saw them coming he would bestir himself and say "my fine fellows," for the whole sentiment of Athens was entirely after his heart; free, venturesome, high-spirited. (64)

Here, the narrator demonstrates how the young Cambridge men appreciate the ancient writings for their beauty and spirit, but at the same time she shows how they take their exposure to the classical works for granted, as if it were their very own peculiar birthright. Conversations on Aeschylus and Sophocles come easily, as one saw in the scene just previous to this one, but these men do not invest themselves in their studies of antiquity as Woolf herself seems to have done. In their minds, the classics belong to them without question; the sense of kinship originates from an actual affinity of the heart. Thus, Jacob feels confident that, despite his failure to become truly proficient in Greek, he could associate even with the great Socrates. Woolf, on the other hand, in both public and private writings often seems to doubt her right to and abilities in the classics, as she evidently suggests in the essay title, "On Not Knowing Greek." This contrast reflects the one that existed in real life between her and Thoby. While he was sent off to university to engage in innumerable conversations with a multitude of eager young scholars much like himself, his sister was left to come to terms with the ancients without the benefit of peers to share in her

learning process. Except for times when Thoby came home to visit, she had no one against whom to test herself.

Jacob's life parallels Thoby's in another way as well. Just as Thoby Stephen toured Greece not long before his death from typhoid in 1906, so too does Jacob Flanders tour Greece before being killed in World War I at the end of Woolf's novel.¹³ Thoby's trip to Greece stood out in his sister's mind for a number of reasons, the most obvious surely being that it was the last vacation they would ever spend together. Another strong association, though, sprang from the land itself. Here before them was the country in which the great philosophers and poets, whose works Virginia Stephen had struggled to learn so that she could share them with her brother, had lived and worked. In this respect, Woolf models Jacob's experience as much on her own responses as she does on Thoby's. Jacob does not have the companionship of siblings, but, forgetting his various fellow travelers and focusing on the landscape itself, he seems to feel the same combination of expectation and awe that is so evident in the young Miss Stephen's autobiographical account of her trip. "But of Olympia," she comments in 1906,

it is difficult to write. Baedeker [sic] will count the statues; a dozen archaeologists will arrange them in dozen different ways; but the final work must be done by each fresh mind that sees them....There are broken pillars of all sizes, & tiles, stones, lion heads, inscriptions; it is like, perhaps, a very disorderly pagan graveyard....Still this is not what the vagrant mind dwells on most; there was thyme growing by the pillars, & fine grass. And there were little hills tufted with delicate green trees all round; & the Alpheus [river] passing on one side. (PA 318-19; brackets belong to the editor but the ellipses are mine)

Similarly, the narrator of Jacob's impressions relates, "There are very sharp bare hills on the way to Olympia; and between them blue sea in triangular spaces....Well now, to go walking by oneself all day--to get on to that track and follow it up between the bushes--or

are they small trees?--to the top of that mountain from which one can see half the nations of antiquity--" (Jacob's Room 123). And not long after, she reports, "Stretched on the top of the mountain, quite alone, Jacob enjoyed himself immensely. Probably he had never been so happy in the whole of his life" (126). In both narratives, the Greek countryside gives rise to an almost religious state of mind and a longing to discover things for oneself. Moreover, as with the author, Jacob has difficulty translating his feelings at this sight into words. So, in one instance, the narrator suggests the breakdown of language with dashes; in the next, she simply sticks to Jacob's raw emotion of supreme pleasure. At this point in the novel, Woolf's earlier experience becomes that of the fictionalized Thoby; she could not know what his impressions had been, so she has created his out of her own.

After Thoby's death, Woolf continued to associate with her brother's Cambridge friends (friends, of course, who, together with Woolf herself, make up the Bloomsbury group). Though they obviously did not elicit the same emotional associations as Thoby, their learning rested on the same foundation of Latin and Greek studies as his had, which we observe in the unselfconscious and easy references to the ancients in their various critical and artistic works.¹⁴ Consequently, their methods of discussion, even as they adopted them from G. E. Moore, had something of a classical aura to them. Explains Leonard Woolf, "Moore's mind was, as I said, Socratic. His character, too, and his influence upon us as young men at Cambridge were Socratic. It is clear from Plato and Xenophon that Socrates' strange simplicity and integrity were enormously attractive to the young Athenians who became his disciples, and he inspired great affection as well as admiration. So did Moore" (Sowing 136), and on the effect of this for Bloomsbury, he reports,

Through us and through [Moore's] Principia Ethica the four others [not among Moore's Cambridge admirers], Vanessa and Virginia, Clive and Duncan, were deeply affected by the astringent influence of Moore and the purification of that divinely cathartic question which echoed through

the Cambridge Courts of my youth as it had 2300 years before echoed through the streets of Socratic Athens: “What do you mean by that?”

(Beginning Again 25)

Bloomsbury’s famously aggressive interrogations reflect the Socratic methods Leonard and his peers learned from Moore at Cambridge, and the Socratic/Moorian question mentioned last has become almost a trademark for the group. Leonard’s description here of Moore and his impact on the conversation of Bloomsbury, then, indicates that the classical influence in Virginia Woolf’s life, no matter how indirect, did continue long after her brother died and her lessons with Miss Case ended, and her own discussion of Plato’s Symposium in “On Not Knowing Greek” suggests that in fact Woolf knew firsthand what it meant to engage in this unrelenting Socratic questioning:

It is an exhausting process; to concentrate painfully upon the exact meaning of words; to judge what each admission involves; to follow intently, yet critically, the dwindling and changing of opinion as it hardens and intensifies into truth. Are pleasure and good the same? Can virtue be taught? Is virtue knowledge? The tired or feeble mind may easily lapse as the remorseless questioning proceeds; but no one, however weak, can fail, even if he does not learn more from Plato, to love knowledge better. (CR 32)

As a student of antiquity since childhood, Woolf surely recognized the Platonic overtones of Bloomsbury’s conversations; their examination of the nature of “good” and “beauty” and “reality” was apparently no less intensive than that of Socrates himself (Moments 189-91). Many years later, therefore, while composing passages like the one quoted above for the Greek essay, Woolf had no difficulty calling upon her experience in the Bloomsbury group to help her investigate the language and philosophical teachings of Plato. It was that experience, along with her own study of Plato, which had taught her “to love knowledge better” in the first place.

While Woolf never did feel entirely confident in her own abilities as a classical scholar, her admiration for the ancients remained strong, and she never ceased to see the authors of antiquity as a source of both beauty and power. At the same time, she understood the sense of deprivation that results from a writer's failure to gain access to those same authors, as she makes clear in her reference to Judith Shakespeare's lack of Horace and Vergil in A Room of One's Own (47). At least some mention of Vergil or Homer, Lucretius or Plato, Horace or the Greek lyricists, the Latin love poet, Catullus, or the Athenian dramatists seems to occur in every one of her novels and quite a few of her essays. By alluding so frequently to the Greek and Roman classics, Woolf does more than pay tribute to the memory of her brother or teacher. She also reveals the strong need and deep appreciation that she herself felt for the ancients. Understanding their value as she did, it is no wonder that Woolf continued throughout her career to turn to them as a fixed reference point from which to explore and refine her own Modernist aesthetic.

Notes

¹ Among those who do, S.P. Rosenbaum and Andrew McNeillie, who both discuss Woolf's early Greek studies, are perhaps the most prominent. Emily Dalgarno also deserves particular attention for the first book length study of Woolf and the Greeks, Virginia Woolf and the Visible World. William Herman stands out as well for both his brief observations on the classical influences in The Waves and, as I noted in my introduction, his suggestion that Woolf should be placed with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound as part "of the High Classical Moment of early 20th century literature in English" (266). He further notes, incidentally, that Woolf was probably more accomplished in the Greek language than Joyce. Other critics who have commented on Woolf's appropriation of antiquity include Molly Hoff and Steven Monte with their separate observations of the influence of the classics in Mrs. Dalloway, Idris Anderson and Jean Wyatt with their discussions of, respectively, the Greek optative and Greek Concepts of Love and Beauty in To the Lighthouse, and Nancy Hynes who outlines the Ciceronian oratorical models used in Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own.

² This tiny sampling comes from the Monks House Papers collection on microfilm, reels 1 and 2, A21 and 26.

³ McNeillie offers as an example the "figure [of Greek scholasticism]...resurgent in Three Guineas, pointing up the educational privileges afforded to her brothers and male peers, especially those now embarked on life at Cambridge--Cambridge being, as we should know, the university to which Virginia Woolf did not go, an ambivalent matter for her, of both pride and grievance" (9). The issue of who has access to classical education also arises in the novels, perhaps most notably in Jacob's Room and The Waves. In the latter, the early division of the primary characters to either public or finishing school, depending on gender, seems particularly symbolic.

⁴ For example, the 5 August 1899 diary entry begins, "I, with the help of 2 string

bags, carted my belongings from the red Butterfly box to my room, & there settled to try & read Greek. Ignominious failure! Three times N. [Vanessa] interrupted me, & the last interruption called me to drive to the Station in the Pony Cart” (PA 136).

⁵ Henceforth, I shall also refer to “On Not Knowing Greek,” an essay very popular with critics interested in the classical influence in the works of Virginia Woolf, simply as the Greek essay.

⁶ For the transcription of this touching tribute, see Henry M. Alley’s “A Rediscovered Eulogy: Virginia Woolf’s ‘Miss Janet Case: Classical Scholar and Teacher.’” Twentieth Century Literature 28.3 (Fall 1982): 290-301. Herman also stresses the personal, even maternal, importance Case held for Woolf (260-63).

⁷ See, of course, A Room of One’s Own, especially Chapter 4, for the discussion of literary mothers.

⁸ Because of the complexity of Woolf’s classical appropriation in this novel, The Waves receives a separate, extended consideration in chapter III of my thesis.

⁹ From the last line of Catullus CI: “atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale” or “and forever, O my brother, hail and farewell” (Catullus 172-73).

¹⁰ This essay, which I will discuss at length in Chapter II, is a revision of a 1919 essay entitled “Modern Novels.”

¹¹ One of the editor’s footnotes for the following quote mentions a letter to Violet Dickinson with a reference to doing Latin with Thoby.

¹² Roe also points out that, presumably not coincidentally, the year Jacob ventures off to Cambridge is also “the year Thoby Stephen died...of typhoid fever” (160).

¹³ An earlier fictional representation of Thoby’s experience in Greece can be found in “A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus,” included in The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf. 2nd ed. Ed. Susan Dick. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989. 63-68.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Roger Fry’s “Essay on Aesthetics” for the Aristotelian

language of “pity and horror,” and E. M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel for an abrupt dismissal of that same philosopher’s discourse on the representation of human experience in literature (San Diego: Harcourt, 1955. pp. 83-84). Virginia Woolf’s husband, Leonard, also freely alludes to the classics throughout his diaries and even comments on his own abilities as a classical scholar (Sowing 95 & 193-94). Classics was also something he shared with Virginia’s brother at one time, as is reflected in the following passage from a letter sent by Thoby to Leonard in Ceylon:

Virgil after all is the top of the tree and Sophocles thereabouts--next come Catullus and Aristophanes, that is my mature opinion so far as the ancients go. They talk of abolishing Greek at Cambridge....If they do you’d better become a naturalized Cingalese--and I shall go to the Laccadives. (Sowing 127)

CHAPTER II

MODERNISM, CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY, AND THE AESTHETIC OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Given the many positive associations that the classics held for Woolf, one may find her willingness to synthesize them into her own artistic vision unsurprising, yet she was not alone in her appropriation. Other writers of so-called high Modernism, including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, clearly found them just as appealing as Woolf did. In fact, any survey of Modern literature in general will reveal authors again and again turning to the works of classical antiquity as they endeavor to address the literary themes and formal issues of their own era. Strangely, considering the Modernist cry to “make it new,” at least in this respect, they do not appear to differ all that much from writers of previous generations. Nonetheless, the Modernists did hope to distinguish themselves from the writers who had preceded them. They consciously rejected the literary stylings of the Victorian and Edwardian writers, and their formal experimentation drove them to reevaluate and ultimately reject their predecessors’ notions of reality as well. Along with innovations in form, the Modernists’ new concept of reality--their privileging of internal over external experience--is what separates writers like Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, Pound, and Woolf from authors of previous eras. However, within the writings of the ancients, the Moderns seem to have discovered both formal and conceptual models to help them address the chaotic, fragmented world in which they found themselves during the early part of the twentieth century.

In the fourth chapter of his 1869 essay, Culture and Anarchy, Victorian poet and scholar Matthew Arnold establishes the terms Hebraism and Hellenism to distinguish

between the two ideological forces at work in human history. The first he describes as “this paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have,” while the latter, he says, refers to

the intelligence driving at those ideas which are, after all, the basis of right practice, the ardent sense for all the new and changing combinations of them which man’s development brings with it, the indomitable impulse to know and adjust to them perfectly. (126)

In other words, Hebraism rests on action and Hellenism on intellectualism. Noting that both forces surely have but one goal--“Man’s perfection or salvation,” Arnold nonetheless points out the conceptual distinctiveness of each. One force encourages us to avoid sin through deliberate action, whereas the other asks us to celebrate “pure knowledge” as a thing to be valued in and of itself. Arnold continues with a delineation of the historical shifts that alternately give rise to and then suppress each of those forces, shifts discernible in, for example, the move from pagan antiquity into the Christian Middle Ages and then again from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. Neither force ever fully disappears; the influence of one simply diminishes temporarily as that of the other intensifies. While the struggle between these two forces that Arnold describes continues in early twentieth century literature and beyond, a privileging of Hellenistic intellectualism clearly occurs in the texts of the Moderns.¹

The classical element is, of course, not immediately, or even equally, apparent in all Modernist writers, but those who stand out for their adaptation of Latin and Greek texts are by no means minor figures of Modernism. James Joyce especially springs to mind for his use of the episodic structure of Homer’s Odyssey to organize and establish mood in the various interludes of his own Ulysses. Ezra Pound also borrows freely from The Odyssey to provide one of the major mythic storylines of the Cantos, beginning with his first canto’s adaptation of Odysseus’ trip into the underworld. Pound alludes to another ancient epic in the title of his poem “Famam Librosque Cano” (“Fame and books I sing”), which not too

subtly echoes the first line of Vergil's Aeneid--"Arma virumque cano," or "Arms and the man I sing." The poet's interest in antiquity² further expresses itself in his various translations, including the Homage to Sextus Propertius. Similarly, in his epigram to The Waste Land, Pound's friend and admirer T. S. Eliot quotes Petronius' reference to the ancient seer, the sibyl of Cumae, who leads Aeneas into the underworld (Satyricon 48); later in the same poem, he speaks in the voice of the gender-shifting Tiresias, victim of a bet between Jupiter and Hera described by Ovid in the Metamorphoses (3.320-338).³ H.D., another notable poet of American Modernism, is perhaps the most explicit in her engagement with Classical antiquity. Throughout her canon, she returns continuously to the Greek myths and the various writers who recorded them--including Sappho, Euripides, Homer, and Theocritus--and the titles of many of her works openly proclaim their mythological preoccupations, for example, "Adonis," "Pygmalion," "Eurydice," "Thetis," "Leda," "At Ithaca," Hippolytus Temporizes, Euripides' Ion, and Helen in Egypt, just to name a few.⁴ Apparently, the classics, and particularly the Greek classics, held a special appeal for the Modernist sensibility, offering, as they did, models for both structure and content that could be readily adapted to early twentieth-century preoccupations of art in a way that the models of the previous generation of English writers could not.

Unlike the nineteenth-century Realists, who try to capture reality through painstakingly precise (if sometimes tedious) descriptions of the material world, the Moderns focus on internal experience. They suggest in their essays, novels, and poems that reality lies in the mind and the heart of the individual. Nothing need happen in a Modernist text because even the most violent actions of an individual do not necessarily reflect the enigmatic current of that person's inner world. In their struggle to grasp reality, the Moderns find that they must confront the psyche directly. Thus, for all the physical sensuality of his texts, Joyce concerns himself primarily with subjective perception. He takes us inside the mind of, for example, Leopold Bloom and forces us to experience reality as Bloom himself experiences it. We hear the snatches of conversation and feel our

mind swept away along various currents of thought, jumping from one idea to the next as the external world periodically forces itself into our consciousness. But this chaotic interplay of thought and sensation is overwhelming, so much so that we tend to lose track of whatever tiny thread of meaning the story has to offer. Yet the helter-skelter interaction between the outside world and Bloom's own consciousness merely reflects the sense of "disorder, despair, and anarchy" that many critics have identified with the Modern experience in general (Bradbury and McFarlane 41). According to T.S. Eliot in his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Joyce's use of Homeric myth to structure his novel "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (681). Essentially, The Odyssey gives meaning to the otherwise seemingly meaningless series of impressions and events Joyce offers us as reality.

The subjective reality that Pound and Eliot represent in their poetry is no less disjointed. They, too, seek to convey through linguistic fragmentation the sense of alienation so impressed upon the Modern consciousness. Pound, for instance, in his early Cantos, moves from a coherent, fairly faithful translation of The Odyssey, book XI (Odysseus' journey into the underworld), to a chaotic jumble of images embracing mythic and historical traditions from antiquity (both Western and far Eastern) to the Renaissance and beyond. Delving into these multiple traditions as he does, that is, grasping first onto one image only to drop it in favor of another and so on, Pound captures the slippery nature of historical memory and shatters the concept of a sensibly linear literary tradition. At the same time, he uses the very tradition he seeks to undermine to achieve a sort of thematic cohesion. His privileging of Odysseus' excursion into Hades helps Pound to establish the idea of the quest as one of the poem's primary themes. Whether the quest is for meaning or form remains questionable; for the Modern mind, either or both would be a relevant concern. The alienated consciousness suggested by the fragmented language of the poem simply tries to make sense of the senselessness that surrounds it.

In The Waste Land and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T.S. Eliot similarly depicts this struggle between order and chaos. Drawing upon not only the mythological past but also a sometimes deceptively mundane present, he uses a mixture of disparate images in both poems--e.g. “Lilacs out of the dead land” in the former and the simultaneous waking and drowning that concludes the latter--to capture the overwhelming bleakness of the Modern condition. Significantly, in The Wasteland, Eliot also combines, as noted earlier, the voice of ancient Tiresias with references to a taxi cab, a jaded typist’s colorless sexual encounter, and a gramophone, thus dismissing the mythic implications of the old prophet. For here Tiresias’ conclusion must differ from the one he comes to in the third book of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The woman Tiresias describes here takes no pleasure in her sexuality; she merely endures her fumbling lover’s touch. Even passion, Eliot seems to say, is lost in the Modern age. The juxtaposition of ancient and Modern reinforces this pessimistic conclusion, and the inclusion of Tiresias in particular adds a sense of morbid inevitability to the dark vision of The Wasteland. Trapped by his prophetic vision, Tiresias can no more escape his existence than the poet can release himself from his.

Given the extent of H.D.’s undisguised appropriation of the Greeks, one can scarcely omit her from any discussion of antiquity and Modernism, regardless of her sometimes marginal status in the canon of the latter. Like Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, H.D. also draws on the ancients to address the thematic and formal concerns of her own poetry. H.D. critic Eileen Gregory reports that, in fact,

[n]o other modern writer is more persistently engaged in classical literary exchange. Beyond incidental intertextualities, which are considerable, H.D. operates out of certain fictional constructs of the hellenic--partially articulated at one point or another--that overwhelmingly shape her conception of her vocation and of her personal affiliations. H.D.’s

hellenism is the major trope or fiction within her writing, providing her orientation within historical, aesthetic, and psychological mappings. (1)

As Gregory points out in this passage, classical allusion saturates H.D.'s poetry, yet these references provide only a hint of the poet's deep fascination with the mythic and literary suggestiveness of the works of the ancient Greeks. Drawing on the imaginative power of this literature to bring definition to her own artistic vision, H.D.'s engagement with antiquity finds probably its finest expression in the impressionistic Helen in Egypt. In this collection, H.D. mixes lyrical musings and prose commentary to interrogate the reliability of the processes behind the transmission of literary, and perhaps even historical, traditions. At the same time, she uses the mythic Helen of Troy, along with other figures of the Trojan War, to connect the often enigmatic lyrics of her collection into a fluid, if still somewhat elusive, whole. H.D. depends on myth in this collection, much as Joyce does in Ulysses, to bring order to the chaotic subjectivity that seems to reign in these poems. The underlying tradition represented by the myth produces a certain coherence of thought.

In their various discussion of the classics, Eliot, Joyce, and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Virginia Woolf herself dwell on the necessity of giving the creative writer and his or her audience a foundational understanding of this underlying classical tradition. The first, for example, in his 1942 essay, "The Classics and the Man of Letters," argues that "the maintenance of classical education is essential to the maintenance of the continuity of English Literature" (The Critic 158). It seems here that for Eliot a basis of classical language and literature is necessary to the development and preservation of a unified English canon. The common heritage represented by the texts of classical antiquity provides coherence in a way nothing else can because those are the texts that have ingrained themselves so fixedly upon the consciousness of English literature. As he states earlier in the same essay,

You may write English poetry without knowing any Latin; I am not so sure whether without Latin you can wholly understand it. I believe...that

the rich possibilities of English verse--possibilities still unexhausted--owe much to the variety of racial strains bringing in a variety of speech and verse rhythm; and that English verse also owes much to the fact that Greek for three hundred years, and Latin for longer than that, have gone into its formation. (The Critic 150)

A familiarity with Latin, explains Eliot, provides insight into the very essence of English poetry. It helps one to perceive the nuances of language and rhythm that allow for a deeper appreciation of the poem itself. However, the ability to appreciate English poetry is not the only motive behind Eliot's championing of the classics. He also wants to ensure the continuing quality of the English literary tradition. Consequently, the creative writer needs a classical education, for "[t]he truly literary mind is likely to develop slowly; it needs a more comprehensive and more varied diet, a more miscellaneous knowledge of facts, a greater experience of men and of ideas, than the kind required for the practice of other arts" (The Critic 154). According to Eliot, an education in the classics provides the broad scope of learning and experience needed to nurture the creative genius of a potentially great writer. Eliot does not necessarily advocate a comprehensive education in the classics for all, but he does suggest that the writer must have a sound familiarity with the classical tradition to respond to and write within his own tradition, and his audience at least a working knowledge (even if only in translation) of both traditions to understand and appreciate what they read.

Although he does not evidence quite the same enthusiasm for his subject as Eliot, Joyce also voices a strong appreciation for a classical education in his very early (1898/99) essay, "The Study of Languages":

In Latin--for the writer acknowledges humbly his ignorance of Greek--a careful and well-directed study must be very advantageous. For it acquaints us with a language, which has a strong element in English, and thus makes us know the derivations of many words, which we then apply

more correctly and which have therefore a truer meaning for us. Again Latin is the recognised language of scholars and philosophers, and the weapon of the learned....Moreover it is for those who study it a great help intellectually, for it has some terse expressions, that are more forcible than many of our similar expressions....[and it] is in a better form the language of Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Cicero, Pliny and Tacitus, all of whom are great names and who have withstood dislodgment from their high seats for thousands of years--a fact which is sufficient in itself to gain them a reading. (29-30)

Like Eliot, Joyce sees an awareness of the classics, if only the Latins, as an essential tool, or “weapon,” for the writer because of their undeniable influence on English language and literature in general. At the same time, he maintains that the great Latin writers deserve to be read simply on account of their own merit, lasting as they have for so many years.

These arguments in favor of classical education do not, of course, fully address the willingness of these authors to appropriate the ancient myths and structures so completely into their own literary creations. Conveniently, Virginia Woolf’s discussion of both the classics and her own aesthetic preoccupations allows us to see more clearly why the Moderns found the ancients so amenable to what they themselves were trying to create. For example, in her essay “On Not Knowing Greek,” Woolf praises the universality of the Greek dramatists. Focusing on their honest representation of character, she concludes,

In spite of the labour and the difficulty [of the foreignness of their culture and of their language] it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. Violent emotions are needed to rouse him into action, but when thus stirred by death, by betrayal, by some other primitive calamity, Antigone and Ajax and Electra behave in the way in which we should behave thus struck down; the way in which everybody has always behaved; and thus

we understand them more easily and more directly than we understand the characters in the Canterbury Tales. These are the originals, Chaucer's the varieties of the human species. (CR 27)

Here Woolf argues that Greek literature has continued to instruct and shape us for over two thousand years, regardless of barriers of speech and climate, because its characters have an aura of authenticity about them. They are, she explains, "the stable, the permanent, the original human being[s]"--the unchanging and unchangeable models from which all other peoples seem to spring forth.⁵ Although Woolf refers to plays rather than novels in these lines, the language she uses vividly recalls that which she uses to describe the "eternal," unchanging Mrs. Brown of the 1924 essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (Captain's Deathbed 110). Woolf says in that essay that, like the Greek dramatists, the Modern novelists must also strive to capture "human nature," for that is exactly what character, or--to use Woolf's own metaphor--"Mrs. Brown," is all about. "Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface" because she represents the very same human spirit that struggles so earnestly to assert itself in the plays of the Greeks. In both essays Woolf celebrates "fidelity" of character (CR 27), and she emphasizes how so many writers fail to achieve it. In short, Woolf is drawn to the Greek playwrights because she feels they succeed, where others do not, in capturing men and women as they truly are.

As she continues her examination in the Greek essay of why the characters of Greek drama do not lose their luster, Woolf reveals that it is because the authors who created them looked not to the flesh as the Edwardians but to the soul as the Modernists: "A fragment of their speech broken off would, we feel, colour oceans and oceans of the respectable drama. Here we meet them before their emotions have been worn into uniformity. Here we listen to the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature singing in her own Greek tongue" (CR 28). For Woolf, the language of the Greeks, unlike that of the Edwardians, triumphs in expressing the eternal experiences of the heart and mind. It gives us internal responses, or emotions, uncorrupted by the falsity of habit. This

is what makes the staid speeches of the magnificent Greek choruses and the outraged cries of their heroines so powerful, and this is what allows the song of the nightingale--what seems to be for Woolf a sort of recurring image for the pure, poetic utterances of the soul--to spring forth whole in Greek literature, whereas it can only echo here and there through the works of the English.

During the early part of the twentieth century, the Modernists strove to set this nightingale singing once again. Writers like James Joyce eliminated the long-winded accounts of the material world so that they might better focus on and express the intricacies of the soul. Similarly, in many of Woolf's novels, the outer world is indistinct, a blur, and the people stand out as impressions of feeling and thought rather than faces and hairstyles or any other trite descriptor. Certainly Woolf's work does not suggest an author overly distracted by physical representation. On the contrary, this was the very tendency she most abhorred and censured in the generation of writers just previous to her own. The Edwardians,⁶ she argues in "Modern Fiction," "are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul" (CR 147). According to Woolf, the Edwardians disappoint us, are incapable of truly touching us, because they focus too much on the ephemeral, external details--"the body"--and not nearly enough on the internal and *eternal*--"the spirit." They do not speak truth because they do not know what truth is. To learn how to capture character, then, the Modernists must turn away and abandon the methods and models of those who immediately preceded them in favor of others like themselves, whose "point of interest...lies...in the dark places of psychology" (CR 152). Woolf makes it clear in "On Not Knowing Greek" that the ancients shared this preoccupation:

In Euripides...the situations are not contained within themselves; they give off an atmosphere of doubt, of suggestion, of questioning; but if we look

to the choruses to make this plain we are often baffled rather than instructed. At once in the Bacchae we are in the world of psychology and doubt; the world where the mind twists facts and changes them and makes the familiar aspects of life appear new and questionable. (CR 29)

Woolf's use of the term "psychology" here and in "Modern Fiction" underscores the sense of affinity that exists for her between the ancients and the Moderns. Like Euripides, the Modernists feel compelled to speak to "the questions of the moment" (CR 30), and to them the Modern world seems plagued by the same maddening turmoil that holds sway in the Bacchae. Woolf theorizes that, again, as with Euripides, when the Modern writer enters this realm of psychology, "the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors" (CR 152). Essentially, it is only by adopting a new literary form, one entirely alien to the writers of the previous generation, that she and her peers can hope to capture the workings of the mind as successfully as the ancients did.

Interestingly, in her attempt to articulate the nature of this new form, Woolf depends on the striking imagery and language of Latin poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius:

The mind receives a myriad impressions--trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms....Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end....Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?...Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,

let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (CR 150)

In this passage, Woolf again tells us that life is what occurs, what exists on the inside; it is thoughts and feelings; it is the various patterns of perception, “the myriad impressions,” that make up the human experience. As we move down the bright street of existence, life does not come to us in an orderly procession, but perpetually washes over us and bathes us in sensations or surrounds us in circles of awareness, “luminous halo[s].” Where and how the outside world encounters the senses determines the ways in which existence may be known. Woolf indicates that the duty of the Modern writer lies in observing these moments of impact and describing their effect on the mind, or the consciousness. Furthermore, she cautions against being misled by the tangible “big” things outside of us, for, aside from their function of offering the stimuli on which we may feast our senses, they hold no consequence.

As mentioned above, the language Woolf uses to explain how the novelist should go about capturing this internal reality calls to mind that used by Lucretius, a philosopher known, oddly enough, for his unyielding materialism, in his De Rerum Natura:

But as it is, no rest is ever given
 To the atoms’ rainfall; there’s no pit, far down,
 All things keep on, in everlasting motion,
 Out of the infinite come the particles
 Speeding above, below, in endless dance. (Lucretius 48)

Here we have the same rush of atoms, albeit in a very different context, that we find in Woolf. Both writers suggest the detached, unthinking movement of this waterfall, and both emphasize its eternal nature. Lucretius, of course, believes this to be the whole of existence. He sees no break between body and soul; intricately woven together from the

moment of conception, both are of equal importance. Still, his impression of reality does not seem entirely antithetical to Woolf's. She may find in the spirit itself the true nature of being, but this does not prevent her from exploring the importance of the outside world to internal processes. She wants to understand how the primary elements, the basic stuff of life, continuously bombard our senses. Ultimately, Woolf must have found Lucretius' delightful poetical descriptions of universal matter very appealing because she, too, sought to express the infinite in mere words. Depending on the imagery of the ancient philosopher, Woolf reveals in "Modern Fiction" the dynamic necessities of the new form she proposes for both herself and her peers. Unlike the static physical descriptions that saturate the works of the Edwardians, the Modernist's representation of reality will capture the Lucretian universe of perpetual motion, a universe where external and internal forces continually interact to create and recreate meaning *ad infinitum*.

Moving from Woolf's essays into her novels, one discovers that the author alludes to the Greek and Latin writers just as much, if not more than Eliot or Joyce. Like them she depends on the classics to lend to her fiction a sense of the underlying literary and historical traditions. In works such as The Waves or the novelistic A Room of One's Own, moreover, she uses these references to the ancients to distinguish between members of different genders and classes. According to the various other critics interested in the Woolf's engagement with the classics, she also draws on the ancients for a number of distinctive literary devices, such as epic simile in Mrs. Dalloway and the Greek optative in To the Lighthouse,⁷ and even for structure, as Nancy Hynes points out with regard to A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas and William Herman notes in relation to The Years.⁸ Nor should one overlook the Lucretian imagery of, for instance, Mrs. Dalloway, in which, by no coincidence surely, Septimus Smith's wife even bears the Italian feminine form of the Latin philosopher's name: Lucrezia. Ultimately, Woolf adopted the myths and models of classical antiquity just as H.D., Eliot, Pound, or Joyce, because she, too, understood the imaginative power and practical usefulness of the tradition they represent. At the same

time, she clearly found the ancients appealing in their own right; if nothing else, her consideration of the Greek playwrights in “On Not Knowing Greek” certainly attests to this appreciation. Above all, however, as we shall see in the following discussion of The Waves, Woolf depended on the classics as the means by which she could attain her own aesthetic vision.

Notes

¹ For probably the most famous expression of this, consider Stephen Daedalus' rejection of Catholicism in favor of an aesthetic awakening in Joyce's Portrait.

² which, incidentally, was not limited to the Western tradition. See, for example, The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius.

³ The previous references come from Western Literature in a World Context. Vol. 2. Ed. Paul Davis, et. al. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. 1618 & 1624. Ovid's Tiresias angers Juno with the claim that women receive greater satisfaction from the sexual act than men.

⁴ Eileen Gregory gives in-depth consideration to H.D.'s engagement with the Greeks in her study, H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines. Cambridge UP, 1997. My sample of short poem titles comes from Gregory's far more comprehensive catalogue, pp. 233-52.

⁵ In her essay on the influence of history on Woolf's later fiction, Julia Briggs notes that in The Waves Woolf herself sought to capture something of this permanence. It is, she says, "a novel that questions the whole concept of historical determination by inquiring what aspects of human nature might lie beyond it, what might be permanent in human experience beyond the succession of Mondays and Tuesdays, beyond daily events, both personal and historical" (74).

⁶ Here Woolf speaks specifically of H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy.

⁷ See Steven Monte for Woolf's adaptation of epic simile in Mrs. Dalloway (especially pp. 589-95) and Idris Baker Anderson for the Greek optative at work in To the Lighthouse.

⁸ Hynes points her reader to "the six parts of Cicero's classical oration: exordium,

narrative, partition, confirmation, refutation, peroration” making up Three Guineas (141).

Herman says The Years is structured as a sort of “ironic epic” and demonstrates the many parallels with both the Iliad and the Odyssey, including the fact that, like those epics, in The Years “[t]he action begins *in medias res*...” (266).

CHAPTER III

BEYOND ALLUSION: THE APPROPRIATION OF CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY IN THE WAVES

Discussing his wife's literary accomplishments, Leonard Woolf once commented, "The Waves seems to me a great work of art, far and away the greatest of her books."¹ And, in fact, The Waves is the most remarkable of all Virginia Woolf's novels in both its extreme modernist experimentalism and its enthusiastic appropriation of antiquity. Standing as the culmination of Woolf's aesthetic vision as she articulates it in her essays on the Modern novel, the work demonstrates the blurring of inconsequential, external details needed to achieve a truer expression of the transcendent, internal reality the author strives for in all her novels. Simultaneously, it conveys a very strong impression of Woolf's deep familiarity with the classics. Woolf engages in the same name dropping of classical authors here that she practices in her other works to suggest intellectual accomplishment and frustration, and she uses allusion to add depth to her narrative in much the same way any capable author would. In this work, however, Woolf moves beyond mere allusion to interweave into the fabric of the novel itself elements of Athenian drama, Latin neoteric poetry, and both Greek and Roman philosophy. Through this all-out appropriation of antiquity, Woolf manages to liberate The Waves from the stifling conventions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century materialism more completely than any other work in her canon.

Woolf seems very early on in her writing process to have conceived of The Waves as embracing a number of classical patterns and themes, and she clearly turned to the Greeks in particular for much of her inspiration. Even the original title for the work, The

Moths, is reminiscent of the titles used to label the comedies of Greek playwright Aristophanes--for example, The Wasps and The Birds. Her final title also calls to mind that of Aristophanes' The Clouds. Fascinated by the Greek dramatists' enigmatic choruses and dynamic heroes and heroines, Woolf drew on them for ideas of both content and form, gradually altering those ideas to fit her own needs and fusing them with a similarly altered version of Platonic dialogue so that together they might provide the basic structure of her novel. In a diary entry dated 18 June 1927, for example, she speaks of The Waves as a sort of "play-poem...some continuous stream...all flowing together: intersected by the arrival of the bright moths" (Diary III, 139). Woolf's vision of her novel here recalls her description of Athenian drama in "On Not Knowing Greek," with her moths replacing the classical chorus. She writes of Sophocles, for example, "He selects what he wishes to emphasize and sings of white Colonus and its nightingale, or of love unconquered in fight. Lovely, lofty, and serene, his choruses grow naturally out of his situations, and change, not the point of view, but the mood" (CR 29). Woolf's language in her diary suggests that, like Sophocles, she also plans to be selective--including only those things which will flow one into another in a "continuous stream" of perception, and the poetical dramatic form she adopts from the Greeks will facilitate this abandonment of superfluous details. Similarly, "the bright moths" she imagines, her own "lovely, lofty, and serene" chorus, will allow her to reach into the story and manipulate the mood without interrupting the overall current of her novel.

As one can see, Woolf felt herself especially drawn to the idea of the chorus, and once the writing of the novel was well underway and the moths had already been replaced by waves, Woolf was still determined to keep hers. She reports in the diary entry of 26 January 1930, "The interludes are very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge and also to give a background--the sea; insensitive nature--I don't know" (Diary III, 285). Because she has chosen to exploit the play-poem idea for her novel, it strikes her as only natural that she will need a chorus. Although uncertain what shape exactly this chorus will

ultimately take, Woolf accepts it as an integral part of her plan for The Waves. It will, she realizes, provide a “bridge,” a means of passing from one act to the next, yet it will also function as a “background,” the solemn contrast to the intimate space that will be the primary focus of her story. In the Greek essay, she voices similar sentiments concerning the utility and beauty of the choruses of Athenian drama:

The intolerable restrictions of the drama could be loosened, however, if a means could be found by which what was general and poetic, comment, not action, could be freed without interrupting the movement of the whole. It is this that the choruses supply; the old men or women who take no active part in the drama, the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the pauses of the wind; who can comment, or sum up, or allow the poet to speak himself or supply, by contrast, another side to his conception. Always in imaginative literature, where characters speak for the themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt. (CR 28-29)

As with her own interludes, the Greek chorus, according to Woolf, can “bridge” the space, or “the pauses of the wind,” between the different events of the play proper. It also gives the plays of the Greeks a certain elasticity. Instead of acting as an abrupt authorial intrusion, the chorus offers the fluidity of voices raised in a harmonious song. It loosens the rigid conventions, “the intolerable restrictions,” that impose themselves on the genre of theatrical literature by introducing a relatively neutral perspective, “undifferentiated voices,” that can provide insights the principle characters may lack. With this window into the action, the vision of the playwright is not limited to a single strand of thought; instead it can encompass as many of the various aspects of life as the play itself will hold. In other words, the chorus provides a freedom that the demands of the dramatic action might otherwise preclude. Considering that The Waves was to become the very type of “imaginative literature” Woolf speaks of above, in which “the author has no part”--to

become, in other words, a novel comprised almost entirely of dialogue--it is no wonder that Woolf decided that she would need to supply herself with that choral "voice."

Unsurprisingly then, Woolf's Modernist adaptation of the Greek chorus is the first thing one encounters upon opening The Waves:²

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (7)

With this introductory choral episode, Woolf establishes the initial mood of her story, one that bespeaks, quite appropriately at this point in the novel, beginnings. She shows us the sea in the early morning hours and the total darkness that almost merges sea and sky into a single element. Gradually, as the dawn approaches, the contours of nature begin to assert themselves onto our senses. This, Woolf seems to say, is how perception begins; first there is nothing; then outlines slowly form until, before long, the mind suddenly senses the immense ocean of reality just below the surface and beyond comprehension--pulsing, pushing, trying to rush free. Thus we begin to see Woolf's purpose for this book. Rather than an authorial voice violently forcing itself into our consciousness, the novel itself beckons to us gently and poetically, suggesting the musical harmonizing Woolf admires in her discussion of Greek tragedy. Woolf uses her chorus in another way as well. With it, she creates periods of detachment from the "myriad impressions" recorded in the main body of the novel. As The Waves develops, these choral interludes, the "insensitive nature" she spoke of in her diary, provide contrast to, and even a relief from, the thoughts and feelings of Woolf's often overpowering characters. Immersed as we become in trying to grasp the particular personalities of Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Bernard, Susan, and Louis, the chorus is necessary to pull us back out and give our sympathies a chance to realign.

Woolf's novel attempts not simply to replay the waterfall of atoms as she and her characters experience it, but also to prompt us to see it, grasp it, for ourselves. The unfeeling, unthinking methodical movement of the waves, of nature, encourages us, if only for a moment, to think beyond the relatively narrow perspectives of the different individuals so that we, too, may see the various patterns trying to impose themselves on our minds.

The choruses of the Greek playwrights have a similar way of providing insight through contrast just as Woolf indicates in the above quoted passage from the Greek essay. Sophocles, for example, in his Electra, presents us with a play full of ambiguity. On the one hand, we feel drawn in by the heroine's suffering and understand her outrage at her mother, Clytemnestra, over the treacherous death of Agamemnon, Electra's father. However, Sophocles' chorus constantly checks our impulse to accept Electra's unrestrained outrage without considering its implications:

Chorus: O say no more. Remember
The harm you do yourself--
Do you not see? --the mischief
Is in your own self-torture.
Hoarder of grief, your sullen soul
Breeds strife unending;
Yet when the foe is stronger
Reason forbids to fight against him. (75)

Although we cannot help but sympathize with his heroine, Sophocles encourages us with speeches such as these to see beyond our sympathy. The rational words of his chorus make us realize that, no matter how justified her sorrow for her father is, Electra only worsens her own predicament by expressing it in front of her more powerful enemies. She lets herself be ruled unwisely by her passion, her "sullen soul," and she is too busy torturing herself with her own misery to care about the futility and danger of what she does. It is something

that we, on the other hand, must consider, and the distancing influence of the chorus allows this. Its impersonal voices lay open the excessiveness of Electra's character so that we may engage in a more truly informed evaluation of the motives and actions within this play. As with the chorus of The Waves, this one asks us to use our own powers of perception and understanding to grasp the vision of the playwright in its entirety.

A look at the Greek plays also gives one a sense of why Woolf might have thought of the chorus as a "bridge." For instance, near the end of Euripides' The Bacchae, the Theban king, Pentheus, is tricked by an offended Dionysus (whom the king has refused to recognize as the son of Zeus) into venturing out in disguise to spy on the women of his city as they participate in the frenzied revels of the god. After he and Dionysus walk off stage, the chorus sings a prophetic prayer for the king's destruction concluding with the cry "O Bacchus, come! Come with your smile! / Cast your noose about this man who hunts / your Bacchae! Bring him down, trampled / underfoot by the murderous herd of your Maenads!" (238, lines 1018-21). Just as their song ends, a messenger enters to report that, while the chorus sang, the Maenads--the crazed women of Thebes, including the king's own mother--have torn foolish Pentheus to pieces. Although the bloody murder occurs offstage, no gap appears in the flow of the dramatic narrative. The chorus clues us in on the trap smiling Bacchus sets for the unsuspecting king and, with the exhortation to "[b]ring him down, trampled / underfoot by the murderous herd of [Dionysus'] Maenads," their song anticipates the messenger's gruesome description of his death.

In The Waves, Woolf also achieves the bridging effect that she earlier hoped for. This is particularly evident in the interlude following the farewell dinner party in honor of Percival:

Now the sun burnt uncompromising, undeniable. It struck upon the hard sand, and the rocks became furnaces of red heat; it searched each pool and caught the minnow hiding in the cranny, and showed the rusty

cartwheel, the white bone, or the boot laces stuck, black as iron, in the sand. (148)

The section just before this interlude is one of the most dynamic and life-affirming of the novel. The continuously shifting monologues focus on (among other things) love, adventure, beauty, and youth. Bernard eagerly anticipates his forthcoming wedding, Percival is on his way to conquer India, Jinny has become so breathtaking and vivacious that everyone in the restaurant stops to see her enter, and of the entire assembly we learn that “the oldest is not yet twenty-five” (123). However, the brutal, burning sun pictured above immediately counteracts this intoxicating atmosphere of optimistic anticipation. Along with Neville’s despair at the company’s parting, the language of this interlude suggests that tragedy is almost upon us. Whereas the young people at the dinner party speak of life, here the rust and bone and abandoned boot laces imply death. The lonely, doomed minnow--apparently cut off from his fellows and the sea--is, moreover, suggestive of Percival, to whom the group has just bid farewell. Consequently, when it comes only moments later, Neville’s report that “[h]e is dead,” though painful, is not altogether unexpected (151). Woolf’s chorus has prepared us for the death of Percival as Euripides’ prepares us for the murder of Pentheus.

Moving from the choral interludes into the heart of the novel itself, one sees that the dialogue also holds something of a dramatic quality. The first few pages especially summon to mind a picture of the stage with its often rapid-fire verbal exchanges. Yet, it is not so much in the manner of exchange but in her characters themselves and the starkness of their language that Woolf once more seems to emulate the Greek dramatists. As a complement to her innovative appropriation of the chorus, she also adopts the Greek play’s brutally honest, if sometimes abrupt, representation of character. Speaking again of Sophocles, for instance, Woolf reports that his characters “are decided, ruthless, direct” (CR 27), and she describes the language of his *Electra*, in particular, “as a matter of fact, bare; mere cries of despair, joy, hate....[which] give angle and outline to the play” (CR 26).

Beaten down by fate, Woolf tells us, Electra is without pretense; she speaks exactly what she feels the moment she feels it. Her emotions control her and her language reflects this. Woolf might also have applied the words she uses above to Sophocles' Antigone, to whom, it has been noted, Woolf returns over and over again in her writings.³ Antigone exhibits a certain sense of dignity that Electra lacks, but, driven to outrage at the treatment of her brother's corpse, she is just as uncompromising as that heroine. When her sister, Ismene, tries to counsel her against breaking the law to give their brother proper burial, Antigone retorts, "And if now you wished / to act, you wouldn't please me as a partner. / Be what you want to; but that man shall I / bury" (161, lines 69-72). Antigone cannot understand Ismene's fear of reprisal because she herself does not feel it. She thinks only of her duty to her brother. Nor will she listen when her sister urges stealth, but instead utterly rejects Ismene's promise of silence: "Dear God! I shall hate you more / if silent, not proclaiming this to all" (162, lines 86-87). Antigone does not use flowery language here to win her sister to her cause. Convinced of the righteousness of the deed she proposes, she pursues it without hesitation and expects the other woman to do the same. When Ismene tries rather to reason with her, Antigone simply refuses to hear, believing that her sister lacks a sense of duty and honor. Her own feelings of outrage are so strong that Ismene's cautiousness inspires only contempt.

Woolf seems to have had this same uncompromising pointedness in mind while creating the characters of The Waves. In her 9 April 1930 diary entry, for example, she calls them her "statues against the sky," explaining "that [she] can give in a very few strokes the essentials of a person's character" (Diary III, 300). Like the heroes and heroines of the Athenian dramatists described by Woolf in her Greek essay, the characters of The Waves represent "types of the original man or woman" captured "before their emotions have been worn into uniformity" (CR 27-28). Indeed, her Susan is just as "decided, ruthless, [and] direct" as an Electra or an Antigone when she declares, "The only

sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, rage and pain" (131).⁴ Her mind does not work in half-measures any more than theirs; she views all the world exactly, with edges intact:

"But I have seen life in blocks, substantial, huge; its battlements and towers, factories and gasometers; a dwelling place made from time immemorial after an hereditary pattern. These things remain square, prominent, undissolved in my mind. I am not sinuous or suave; I sit among you abrading your softness with my hardness, quenching the silver-grey flickering moth-wing quiver of words with the green spurt of my clear eyes." (215)

Susan's unbending resolve to see the world as it is and to act accordingly recalls Antigone's refusal to be softened by the appeasing words of Ismene. Like Antigone, she finds the cowardly dependence on the slipperiness of language--"the silver-grey flickering moth-wing quiver of words"--distasteful, as something to be wiped out, or abraded. And like Antigone, she expresses herself plainly, almost violently. She refuses to dwell on the unstable details because it is the clear and angular outlines that strike her as most real. Although she presumably inherits her catch phrase, "I love. I hate," from the Latin poet Catullus,⁵ in her abrupt delivery of such words, she aligns herself most persuasively with Woolf's conception of the Greeks. In "On Not Knowing Greek," Woolf attributes this "lightning-quick, sneering, out-of-doors manner" to cultural circumstance and dramatic necessity:

The humour of the people was not good-natured like that of our postmen and cab-drivers. The taunts of men lounging at the street corners had something cruel in them as well as witty. There is a cruelty in Greek tragedy which is quite unlike our English brutality....In fact, of course, these Queens and Princess were out of doors, with the bees buzzing past them, shadows crossing them, and the wind taking their draperies. They

were speaking to an enormous audience rayed round them on one of those brilliant southern days when the sun is so hot and yet so exciting. (CR 25)

For Woolf, the Greeks enjoyed a certain stark earthiness that asserts itself in their dramatic characters. Surrounded by buzzing bees, shadows, wind, and burning sun, they cannot help but project boldness and candor. Basking as they do under the vibrant Aegean sun, even their humor and wittiness take on a cruel and taunting edge, one that simply reflects the unyielding, ruggedly natural world that surrounds them. Susan shares in this out-of-doors earthiness:

“At this hour, this still early hour, I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees; mine are the flocks of birds, and this young hare who leaps, at the last moment when I step almost on him. Mine is the heron that stretches its vast wings lazily; and the cow that creaks as it pushes one foot before another, munching; and the wild, swooping swallow; and the faint red in the sky, and the green when the red fades; the silence and the bell; the call of the man fetching cart-horses from the fields--all are mine.”
(97)

Rejecting the city and her education as worthless, Susan wants only to stay on her father's farm and to make it her own. As she immerses herself in the sights and sounds that surround her, she envisions herself as just another feature of the landscape--the field, the barn, the trees--and indeed even the startled hare is slow to distinguish her as a possible intruder to his world. Susan feels so closely tied to the land that she considers herself part of it, and this unfailing sense of who she is gives Susan definition as a character, definition Woolf failed to find in the works of writers such as Arnold Bennett.

Although the liberating chorus and unmitigated characters were to have supreme importance in her novel, Woolf's plan for The Waves entailed far more than a play--even a Greek play--ever could. The earlier mentioned June 1927 diary entry continues with Woolf's conjecture that “[a] man and a woman are to be sitting at a table talking. Or shall

they remain silent?...She might talk, or think, about the age of the earth; the death of humanity” (*Diary III*, 139). These lines echo Woolf’s conception of a Platonic dialogue as expressed in, once more, “On Not Knowing Greek”:

It is Plato, of course, who reveals the life indoors, and describes how, when a party of friends met and had eaten not at all luxuriously and drunk a little wine, some handsome boy ventured a question, or quoted an opinion, and Socrates took it up, fingered it, turned it round, looked at it this way and that, swiftly stripped it of its inconsistencies and falsities and brought the whole company by degrees to gaze with him at the truth. (*CR* 32)

In her diary, Woolf imagines that her novel will feature a conversation of sorts, but her words fail to evoke pictures of the immediate, seemingly spontaneous verbal give and take necessary for the on-stage performance of a Greek play. Rather they suggest the deliberate thoughtfulness of the speakers in Plato’s *Symposium*. Although it does not seem to necessitate the socially interactive quality of the Platonic dialogue (with its party of friends eating, drinking, and perhaps flirting with one another), Woolf’s vision does center on conversation.⁶ One suspects, moreover, that the ideas she proposes for her characters to explore--“the age of the earth [or] the death of humanity”--are ones that probably Socrates himself would not have disdained to take up and examine from every angle. Presumably, the conversation of Woolf’s characters, like that of the *Symposium*’s, will propel them to whatever unadulterated truth they seek.⁷

Turning to the novel itself, one finds the striving for truth that Woolf suggests in her diary. Thus, Bernard suggests, “Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is despatched--love for instance--we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next” (251). Calling on the image she uses in the Greek essay, Woolf gives Bernard the almost Socratic function of speculation and gradual unfolding.

Essentially, she creates for us the leisurely Symposium-like atmosphere that she proposes in her diary and that she actually found in Plato:

Then, said Eryximachus, as you are all agreed that drinking is to be voluntary, and that there is to be no compulsion, I move, in the next place, that the flute-girl...be told to go away....on this day let us have conversation instead; and, if you will allow me, I will tell you what sort of conversation....I mean to propose that each of us in turn shall make a discourse in honor of Love. (Plato 324)

Having just finished their meal, the guests of Agathon prepare to enjoy one another's company for the night. One of them, Eryximachus, recommends an alternative to drinking and listening to the music of the flute-girl: conversation. Then, as is usual at any gathering attended by Socrates, the company's discussion naturally turns to a topic relevant to the hearts and souls of all mankind--in this case, love. With the dialogue now well underway, each man takes a turn sharing what he believes to be the nature of love. Phaedrus tells how love makes men brave and honorable (because everyone--man and woman alike--despises to appear cowardly or dishonest in the eyes of his or her beloved). Pausanias argues that there are actually two gods called Love, with one being superior and less worldly than the other. Later Aristophanes tells how love can help man find his other, lost half. And so the discussion continues until, at last, the privilege of conversation falls to Socrates.

Beginning in his typical fashion, Socrates implies that he may not be wholly qualified to address the proposed subject but he will give it a try all the same just so long as his companions realize that he has planned no approach but will simply proceed with "any words and in any order which may happen to come into my mind at the time" (343). From there, slowly, step by step, just as Woolf describes in her Greek essay, he takes up the question, "finger[s] it, turn[s] it round, look[s] at this way and that," etc., and gradually works his way to the truth. Incorporating the lessons given to him by his former lover,

Diotima, he spends the greater part of the night discussing love and the advantages it brings, all the while guiding his friends to something even bigger:

But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty--the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality, and all the colors and vanities of human life--thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty divine and simple, and bringing into being and educating true creations of virtue and not idols only? Do you not see that in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities; for he has hold not of an image but of a reality, and bringing forth and educating true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. (354-55)

From a general description of love and its earthly benefits, Socrates moves beyond to explain that ultimately the true purpose of love is to lead mankind closer to the eternal forms, to help it see the things in themselves (e.g. “divine beauty...pure and clear and unalloyed”) rather than the mere reflections of the things that man’s limited powers of perception actually allow him. Followed to its true end, it has the power to make man almost like a god--perhaps, anyway, the companion of God--because beauty and the other forms love potentially leads to have the ability of rousing “true virtue.”

Again, this sense of a gradual reaching for the transcendent is very similar to the effect that Woolf achieves in The Waves. In other words, after the first few pages of simplistic, fleeting impressions, the overall flow of the conversation in her novel acquires the feel of a Platonic dialogue, with each character speaking in his or her turn in an attempt to reach truth. At the same time, she just slightly alters Plato’s method to arrive at her own purpose. For example, in the second part of the novel where all the children are sent away to school, the boys share their impressions of religion, beginning with Louis:

“Now we march, two by two,” said Louis, “orderly, processional, into

chapel. I like the dimness that falls as we enter the sacred building. I like the orderly progress.... We put off our distinctions as we enter. I like it now, when, lurching slightly, but only from his momentum, Dr. Crane mounts the pulpit and reads the lesson from a Bible spread on the back of the brass eagle. I rejoice; my heart expands in his bulk, in his authority.” (34)

Next Neville speaks:

“The brute menaces my liberty,” said Neville, “when he prays. Unwarmed by imagination, his words fall cold on my head like paving-stones, while the gilt cross heaves on his waistcoat. The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them. I gibe and mock at this sad religion....” (35)

Like Plato, Woolf allows the different voices of her novel a chance to explore the questions of life set before them, but the answer they conclude upon is less definite than that of Socrates. One young man sees religion and authority as a comfort, another as an oppression, and still another, Bernard, feels swayed neither one way nor the other by the ceremonies he sees; they merely “seem pitiable in [his] eyes” (36). No conclusion, though, is really privileged here; the impressions of each of the characters are simply recorded as they come to him, essentially as the atoms fall. Because Louis suffers from anxiety over his position as an outsider, he enjoys the feeling of losing himself in the crowd, of putting “off [his] distinctions,” that chapel allows. Thus, it is a refuge to him and the man before him--Dr. Cane--with all his size and power, a protector. Neville, on the other hand, finds a lack of poetry in the man’s words: they are “cold,” “unwarmed by imagination.” For a boy obsessed by the lyrical beauty of Catullus, the man can inspire only contempt. But neither boy is necessarily right or wrong. While for Plato each truth has but one form, Woolf believes that “truth is various” (CR 32).⁸ The characters of The Waves investigate that variety.

While Woolf alludes to the Latin classics as much as, or even more than, the Greeks in this and other novels,⁹ how she actually appropriates them here is perhaps more difficult to see than it is with the latter. Nevertheless, they have a huge influence on the overall tone of *The Waves*. Woolf relies on the Greeks for her novel's basic structure and feel, but, aside from Susan's, the specific voices she gives her characters as often as not evoke thoughts of the Latin poets Catullus and (of course) Lucretius. The first, especially, Woolf directly refers to probably more than any other literary figure named in the novel. A collection of Catullus' poetry apparently never leaves Neville's side, and, as noted earlier, one of the Latin poet's most famous epigrams--"I hate and love. Why I do so, perhaps you ask. I know not, but I feel it, and I am in torment" (163, LXXXV)--enjoys constant mention by, or in reference to, Susan.¹⁰ However, Woolf does more than allude to the poet and borrow his phrases; she also uses aspects of his literary persona to define the personality of his most ardent admirer in the novel: Neville. Neville himself denies this--claims, "I am one person--myself. I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore" (87)--but in fact he does, however unconsciously, do just that. Like his idol, he suffers from an all-consuming passion for one person and sees love as a mixture of delight and pain. For example, before Percival's death, Neville can think of no one else; the man is his everything and it is agony for Neville to be away from him. This obsession rears its head most visibly on the day of the farewell party. As he awaits Percival's arrival, Neville is consumed with a burning desire to see him. He despairs as the minutes pass and still the other man does not appear. Then Percival enters the restaurant, and suddenly Neville's world becomes complete: "Now," said Neville, "my tree flowers. My heart rises. All oppression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over" (122). He is so captivated by his love for Percival that he needs the other man's presence to feel whole and alive, "for his tree to flower." Although this passage lacks the specific allusion to Catullus offered above, Neville's passion here still recalls the Latin poet's infatuation for his Lesbia:

You ask me how many kissings of you, Lesbia, are enough for me and

more than enough. As great as is the number of the Libyan sand that lies on Silphium-bearing Cyrene, between the oracle of sultry Jove and the sacred tomb of old Battus; or as many as are the stars, when night is silent, that see the stolen loves of men,--to kiss you with so many kisses, Lesbia, is enough and more than enough for your mad Catullus; kisses, which neither curious eyes shall count up nor an evil tongue bewitch. (9-11, VII)

Lesbia is everything to Catullus just as Percival is to Neville. He wishes to spend every moment with her, losing himself in her innumerable kisses, because without her in his arms he begins to feel the "curious eyes" and "evil tongue[s]" of men upon them. He believes that only their love can protect them from the outside world.

All the same, both men realize how hurtful love can be. Catullus observes, "Lesbia always speaks ill of me, and is always talking about me. May I perish if Lesbia does not love me. By what token? because it is just the same with me. I am perpetually crying out upon her, but may I perish if I do not love her" (167, XCII). Neville seems to imitate his complaint: "I know what loves are trembling into fire; how jealousy shoots its green flashes hither and thither; how intricately love crosses love; love makes knots; love brutally tears them apart. I have been knotted; I have been torn apart" (214). For these men, love means both incredible pleasure and almost unspeakable pain. Catullus agonizes over the loss of Lesbia's favor, alternately "crying out" against her and desiring her back. He feels that without her love he will be nothing--that he will "perish." It is much the same for Neville. He chooses his "one" to love and then lets his passion consume him and tie him up in knots. Then when love fails him, he is destroyed, or "torn apart."

Neville also emulates Catullus in his expression of grief. After Percival's death, he addresses the pain of his loss: "'Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob'" (152). Neville is as consumed here by grief as in the previously quoted passage he was consumed by love. It devours him. Though he

insists that the pain “shall not destroy” him, he seems almost incapacitated by the immensity of his despair. Catullus has a similar reaction to the death of his brother:

Ah me unhappy, who have lost you, my brother! You, brother, you by
your death have destroyed my happiness; with you all my house is buried.
With you all my joys have died, which your sweet love cherished, while
yet you lived. By reason of your death, I have banished from all my mind
these thoughts and all the pleasures of my heart. (141, LXVIII).¹¹

In this passage, Catullus speaks as if there is no reason to go on now that his brother is dead. All pleasure and joy have fled from his heart and mind, and, like Neville, he has nothing to hold onto but pain. The “sweet love” of his brother, the last member of his family (i.e. his house) left to him, meant so much that the loss of it overpowers him. Now he can only wallow in sorrow. If Neville ever looked for an example for how to express his grief, then surely he found it here.

Nor is it only for expressions of love and grief that he turns to Catullus; he models his conception of himself as a poet after him as well:

“I would rather be loved, I would rather be famous than follow perfection
through the sand. But am I doomed to cause disgust? Am I a poet? Take
it. The desire which is loaded behind my lips, cold as lead, fell as a bullet,
the thing I aim at shop-girls, women, the pretense, the vulgarity of life
(because I love it) shoots at you as I throw--catch it--my poem.” (88)

Catullus, too, wishes to be remembered: “To whom am I to present my pretty new book, freshly smoothed off with dry pumice-stone? To you, Cornelius....So take and keep for your own this little book, such as it is, and whatever it is worth; and may it, O Virgin my patroness, live and last for more than one century” (3, I). Catullus and the other neoterics (Latin poets of the 1st century BCE) strove for innovation and sophistication because they wished to distinguish themselves from those who came before.¹² Catullus, in particular, is remembered for his delightful, witty, and often vulgar verses, a style which Woolf’s

character seems to aspire to adopt for himself. Neville cringes at the idea that he will always disgust people (especially Percival, we imagine: but here also Bernard, whom he has taken into his confidence) but he glories, like Catullus often does, in that which disgusts: “the vulgarity of life.” Despite this fear, Neville must trust Bernard not to let his poem, his vision, slip through his fingers because he also partakes in the other poet’s impulse to share his work. Whatever he may claim, Neville obviously identifies quite closely with Catullus.

Unsurprisingly, considering the imagery in “Modern Fiction,” Woolf also expresses a Lucretian preoccupation in this novel. In the 28 November 1928 diary entry, she explains, “The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes....I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate” (*Diary* III, 136). Woolf again speaks of atoms and the desire to capture life in its entirety, “to give the moment whole; whatever it includes,” yet it sounds like such an arduous task she sets for herself--this striving for total saturation. She explains that to achieve it she will have to dispense with the excess, “to eliminate the waste, deadness, and superfluity,” but at the same time indicates that almost nothing can be left out. Lucretius, too, presents his conception of “the nature of things” as a complex one to relate:

....To teach great things,
 I try to loose men’s spirit from the ties,
 Tight-knotted, which religion binds around them.
 The Muses’ grace is on me, as I write
 Clear verse about dark matters. (46)

Lucretius realizes how difficult it will be to make others see the fundamental particles of the universe as he does (i.e. “to teach great things”). The traditions and prejudices of religion that he must overcome are so powerful that they have knotted themselves around mankind’s very spirit. He knows that what he asks of himself--“to write clear verse about

dark matters"--can only be accomplished with the favor, or "the grace," of the Muses upon him. In *Lucretius*, Woolf discovered someone whose attempts to alter the way people understand reality were no less courageous and inventive than her own.

Given the associations between this poet and her brother Thoby, one might expect that, like *Catullus*, *Lucretius* would find expression in one of the male characters of the novel,¹³ but actually it is in Rhoda that this poet-philosopher comes most alive. The haunting lyrical imagery of Rhoda's language inspires a sense of being swept away, reabsorbed into the undifferentiated stuff of the cosmos--the flowing atoms:

"There was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, 'Consume me.' That was at midsummer, after the garden party, and my humiliation at the garden party. Wind and storm coloured July. Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard....I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather." (64)

Here Rhoda seems very close to the primary elements, so close that she is nearly coming apart herself and dissolving back into them. This both appeals to her and frightens her at the same time. The star she asks to consume her; the puddle she cannot bring herself to cross. For some reason, she feels as though she is being tossed about like a feather in the wind and losing her identity. In this passage, Rhoda seems to suffer from the ailment of spirit described by *Lucretius* that causes the otherwise tightly-knitted atoms of "body and soul" to begin to lose cohesion:

Sometimes, even within the body's bonds,
Spirit seems tired, or weakened for some reason,
And wants to get away; then faces pale,
Assume that last-hour look, and all the limbs
Collapse, in what we call a faint or swoon,
And all of us, in mortal terror, try

To keep the bonds of body and soul together.
 At such time the power of mind or spirit
 Is frail as body, and a bit more pressure
 Would bring it all to ruin. (102-103)

According to Lucretius, when the soul begins to fail, the body can no longer sustain itself. As with Rhoda, who feels herself falling, it “collapse[s]” into oblivion. The poet further explains that each of us fears this loss of self and struggles against it, much as Rhoda struggles against it when she balks at the puddle, fearing that it will engulf her. In both cases, however, the fight is not easily won; just as Rhoda loses herself to the fear of the material world that surrounds her, so too must the dissolving relationship between body and spirit eventually end in failure, or “ruin.”

This fear of experience is a recurring one for Rhoda. At another point she says, “‘I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I can not deal with it as you do--I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate...’” (130). She finds the impact of sensory input, “the shock of sensation,” unendurable. She seems to feel every single one of Woolf’s “innumerable atoms” as they hit and cannot pull them all together to make sense of them. Here again, Rhoda’s words are reminiscent of Lucretius--this time of his explication of the sensory overload that causes sleep:

And this same air pervades the innerpart
 As we inhale, exhale; it strikes the body
 Both ways at once, and as these blows persist
 In penetration through the smallest pores
 To our most elemental particles
 In time, and little by little, so to speak,
 The limbs, beneath this constant pressure, yield,

Slump and collapse, the regular arrangement
Of particles disordered, body and mind. (146)

Lucretius tells us here that even the continual impact of common air exhausts us. As we begin to feel it penetrating to our own “most elemental particles”--the atoms of which we ourselves are made--we can hold up no better than, say, Rhoda. Essentially, we all are *pummeled* to sleep (and later Rhoda to death).

Remarkably, Rhoda’s descriptions of existence are not all so pessimistic. Later at the dinner party, for example, once settled among her friends after the initial shock of recognition, she seems to feel less beaten down than embraced:

“Look,” said Rhoda; “listen. Look how the light becomes richer, second by second, and bloom and ripeness lie everywhere; and our eyes, as they range round this room with all its tables, seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, umber and queer ambiguous tints, which yield like veils and close behind them, and one thing melts into another.” (135)

We also find this melting, or rather mingling, of one thing into another in Lucretius: “The same atoms / Constitute ocean, sky, lands, rivers, sun, / Crops, bushes, animals; these atoms mingle / And move in different ways and combinations” (43). For Lucretius, this sharing of the fundamental stuff of life represents a sort of immortality. If one thing dies, its atoms live on in the rest. Certainly Rhoda does not take comfort in this mingling or melting of particles as Lucretius does, but she can at times sense the beauty of it and see the “curtains of colour” which surround her. When she does, suddenly everything becomes fresher, richer, and more alive. As with Woolf herself, it seems that overall Rhoda’s conception of the universe, though dark, is not far off from that of Lucretius.

Ultimately, Woolf’s appropriation of Lucretian imagery in this novel functions in much the same way as her adaptation of the Greek chorus, Platonic dialogue, and the artistic persona of Catullus. Each of these things allows her in some way to address the different aesthetic concerns that arise in her essays on Modernism. By structuring her

novel on the fusion of Greek drama and philosophy, Woolf frees herself from the restrictions of traditional linear narrative without abandoning The Waves to formless chaos. She also uses the Greeks to help her capture, within the character of Susan, the “original human being” that she felt the works of her predecessors lacked. Finally, she turns to the Latins to help her determine the nature of the artist and his or her vision of the external world. Her use of Lucretian imagery, especially, facilitates Woolf’s exploration into the relationship between physical stimuli and internal perception. In this way, Woolf is able to speak to the needs of her aesthetic and to distinguish herself from previous generations of English novelists, thus assuring her works a place of honor in the canon of high Modernism.

Notes

¹ Preface to A Writer's Diary (ix).

² William Herman also briefly considers "the choral parts" of The Waves, pp. 264-65.

³ See especially Sybil Oldfield's "Virginia Woolf and Antigone--Thinking Against the Current." The South Carolina Review 29.1 (Fall 1996): 45-57.

⁴ For Herman's fleeting observations on the relationship between Neville and the Greek tragic heroes and heroines, see pp. 263-64.

⁵ See below for my discussion of the poetic persona of Catullus as adopted by Neville.

⁶ On conversation and Woolf, Beth Carole Rosenberg writes,

We may then understand that for Woolf it is the conversational aspects of prose that gives prose its openended, invitational quality. It is this aspect that Woolf investigates and develops throughout her growth as a writer, and it is this aspect that takes on a variety of forms: from the conversational frame she gives many of the essays to the use of dialogue in her essays and novels and the dialogic style found in her major novels....Conversation for Woolf means not merely an oral exchange between two or more people, but ultimately the communication between different points of view, where one point of view is the function of every other point of view it comes into contact with. (57-58)

⁷ We should probably note here, as Stephen Ramsay does in his essay on Woolf's reading of the classics (9), that her view of Plato is not entirely reliable--she sees the conversation almost as an end in itself while Plato, on the other hand, would have most certainly privileged the result of the conversation--the truth--above all else.

⁸ See previous note.

⁹ Just quickly flipping through the novel, I find Catullus mentioned by name at least five times, Vergil three times, and Lucretius twice. They are not alone. Other notable literary figures mentioned throughout include Plato, Shakespeare, and Byron. Unsurprisingly, all references to such figures are reserved for the three male characters of the novel. As in Woolf's other works, a knowledge of serious literature, whether classical or British, implies an equally serious liberal education--something that was, in Woolf's day, usually withheld from women.

¹⁰ As Gillian Beer notes in passing in her discussion of The Waves (85-86).

¹¹ Another poem dedicated by Catullus to the memory of his dead brother (#CI) contains the epigram that Woolf used at least once in reference to her brother Thoby: "frater, ave atque vale" ("brother, greetings and farewell"). See Chapter I.

¹² For a fine discussion of the Latin neoteric poets, of whom Catullus is the most famous, see Gian Biagio Conte's Latin Literature: A History. Trans. Joseph B. Solodow. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994. 136-54.

¹³ And, in fact, in her consideration of the Lucretian influence in The Waves, Susanna Rich focuses on the language of Bernard and Louis.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this study, I have touched on just a few of the classical authors Woolf likely called upon to help her shape her aesthetic vision: Plato, Lucretius, Catullus, and the Greek playwrights. Other critics interested in this topic might also look to Sappho, whom Woolf praises in her Greek essay, or to Aristotle, whose theories of literature Woolf considers “the first & the last words on this subject” (PA 240-41). Surely much about Woolf’s relationship to the ancients can also be garnered from Woolf’s extensive (if sometimes illegible) reading notes and translations. I especially cannot help but wonder what, if anything, Woolf got from her reading of Vergil’s story of Dido and Aeneas (Aeneid, book IV), for which Vergil himself seems to have appropriated imaginative techniques from Greek tragedy.

In any case, looking at the extensive appropriation of the classics in The Waves, one can see how significant the ancients were to Virginia Woolf. Her admiration for the Greek and Roman authors, born in childhood and nurtured throughout her life, allowed Woolf to look to the ancients as not only models for emulation but also guides into her own aesthetic speculations. As I noted in Chapter II, she depended on them just as much as, say, Joyce or Eliot to give coherence and structure to both her literary theories and the artistic expression of those theories in her novels. In the future, one might explore more deeply how Woolf’s appropriation differs from that of her male contemporaries. What role, after all, does gender play in the interpretation of the classics? And does formal training influence the way authors approach the classics differently than informal training or even self-training? Interest in Woolf’s fascination with the classics certainly does not preclude an interest in gender issues.

Finally, I am left with the question of whether or not Woolf really is the iconoclast

that many take her to be. The Moderns were indeed driven by the desire to break from literary and historical traditions, but when we look at them we find that it simply was not possible. Regardless of how they approached the past--even if they sought simply to reject it--they could not avoid it. Though scholars have begun to look at Woolf's studies in literary history, my investigation indicates that there is much more to do. Perhaps what we shall eventually find is that Woolf is not the avant garde artist we take her to be. Perhaps we shall find that she is merely one who appropriates the past.

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