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On the Greek-Talking Birds: Virginia Woolf and the Greek-Talking Men

Abstract: That the attitude towards Greece in England in the first decades of the 20th century was as gendered as classical education had been for centuries, and that the latter is the reason for the former, can be glimpsed when one reads, side by side, two hauntingly similar yet disconcertingly different essays on Greece: Virginia Woolf's "On Not Knowing Greek" (1925) and W.H. Auden's "The Greeks and Us" (1948). Both authors reflect upon spiritual and intellectual indebtedness to Greece and both reveal a deep admiration for the Greek heritage. Yet, they do so from two different angles. Whereas Auden writes about Greece from the perspective of an insider who belongs there, confidently and unquestionably, Woolf does so as an outsider. To Auden, the Greeks and "us" share the same emotional and intellectual continuum; to Woolf, the distance between them and us is unbreachable. In her withdrawn admiration she refrains even from admitting that she is quite fluent in ancient Greek, suggesting — with the very title — the contrary. These opposite perspectives on equally beloved tradition are all the more striking because Woolf, as much as Auden, was a connoisseur of Greek literature. Exploring this issue, it is necessary to look at the significance of the classics in the traditional model of education with its gender division, at English literary tradition, and at psychological and artistic reactions to the pressure exerted by the patriarchal discourse, such as the "Greek-talking birds" from Woolf's hallucinations. As I demonstrate in this article, the Greek-talking birds are one key trope in Woolf's fiction that suggest her obsession with the language and her fear of gender exclusion, but perhaps more than anything they evoke the mythical figure of Tiresias, the shadowy model for all sex-shifters.

Recounting her youth in "Professions for Women," Woolf mentioned two things she wished she had spent more time doing when she was young: "learning Greek grammar" and "roaming the world in search of adventures" (Woolf 1993: 103). Naming these two activities was close to admitting that she wished she had been born a boy. Education in Greek and Latin, as well as Grand Tours around Europe and working in all areas of the vast empire were destinies that awaited boys. As a girl, Woolf had spent her youth fighting the phantom[1] (Woolf 1993: 102), a tiresome and time-consuming rite of passage, which nonetheless was, for her generation, "part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf 1993: 103).

[1] The phantom was the Victorian idea of the feminine that Woolf called, after the heroine of a famous poem, "The Angel in the House." See Woolf (1993: 102–103).

What was an unachievable dream for girls, was a given for boys. When W.H. Auden recounts *his* youth, he does so as if telling a fairy tale, which — as he himself admits — it sounds like from the perspective of the late 1940s:

> Once upon a time there was a little boy. Before he could read, his father told him stories about the War between the Greeks and the Trojans. Hector and Achilles were as familiar to him as his brothers, and when the Olympians quarreled he thought of his uncle and aunts. At seven he went to a boarding school and most of the next seven years were spent in translating Greek and Latin into English and vice versa. Then he went on to another boarding school which had a Classical Side and a Modern Side.
> The latter was regarded by boys and masters alike in much the same way as, in a militarist country, civilians are regarded by officers, and with the same kind of degrees of inferiority: history and mathematics were, like professional men, possible; the natural sciences, comprehensively labeled Stinks, like tradesmen, were not. The Classical Side, too, had its nice distinctions: Greek, like the Navy, was the senior, the aristocratic service.
> It is hard to believe now that this story is not a fairy tale but a historical account of middle-class education in England thirty-five years ago. (Auden 1973: 3)

Auden's account is just one of many showing that well into the first decades of the twentieth century an education in the classics was at the heart of education for English boys and young men (Auden, 3–5). Girls and young women had for so long been excluded from it that it is easy to understand why the two ancient languages, Latin and Greek, become nothing short of an obsession or close to a fetish to a number of women writers (Gilbert and Gubar 1993: 85–91). As Gilbert and Gubar explain:

> [S]uch literary 'daughters of educated men' knew that the education in the classics which their brothers received — that is, education in Latin and Greek — functioned, in the way Walter Ong has shown, as a crucial step in gender demarcation. Just as importantly, as Ong also notes, in boys' schools such a classical education instilled masculinist values through a rhetorical training in 'agonistic' oral competition, which represented a puberty rite that further developed male identity. These men and boys, in other words, had access to a privileged priestly language, what Ong would call a *patrius sermo*, which women could only counter with the vocabulary of witchcraft, the male Mass masked as a female Black Mass. Thus like Virginia Woolf, who fantasized in moments of madness that the birds were speaking Greek to her, women writers from Fanny Burney to Christina Stead have long been obsessed with the exclusiveness of a (masculinist) linguistic code they both refuse to speak and seek to crack. In one way or another, too, many adopt strategies comparable to the one invented by Louie Pollit, the heroine of Christina Stead's *Kunstlerroman, The Man Who Loved Children*, who creates a witchlike private language that sounds suspiciously like a parodic mixture of Latin and Greek. TRAGOS: HERPES ROM. JOST 1, which means TRAGEDY: THE SNAKE-MAN, ACT 1, is the play she produces in it, and when her father reacts in annoyance at his dependence on her translations — 'Why couldn't it be in English?' — she enlightens him: 'Did Euripides write in English?' (Gilbert and Gubar 1993: 86–87).

Consistent with the line of reasoning of Gilbert and Gubar in the above fragment, I believe that there were substantial grounds for developing, in the daughters of educated men and the sisters of educated brothers, a sentiment which, after

Freud's nomenclature, one could label the "knowing-Greek-envy," but which I would rather call the "not-knowing-Greek-sadness."

This sadness — for "resentment" is a hostile and a self-accusatory word — of "not-knowing-Greek" points to something more complex than not having had Greek lessons in adolescence and not being able to read Sophocles in the original in adulthood. The lingering discomfort caused by the lack of a university education even in a highly educated person — the feeling of being excluded from something vital and nourishing — afflicted some of even the most renowned female writers. Virginia Woolf is one striking example. "Not-knowing-Greek," — the phase that she chose herself as the title of her meditative essay on Greece — is not to be taken literally, or at least not in her case. The classics was Woolf's "main study" in her years of "lonely self-education" (Lee 1999: 141) and since 1897 she had had regular private classes in Greek and Latin. "A Greek notebook, started in Greece in 1906 and continued in the next two years … shows … Sophocles' *Ajax*, Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes' *The Frogs* ... carefully annotated; and there is an eloquent commentary on the *Odyssey*" (Lee, 142). Seen in this light, Woolf is the last person to be scorned for her lack of education; being a daughter of Leslie Stephen, she was as close to become a *femme de lettres* as one could possibly be. The amount of time she spent in her father's library, devouring book after book, often as much as four at once (Lee, 140–141), more than made up for her lack of formal education. Yet, this is not quite how she perceived herself. In a letter to Ethel Smyth dated June 8, 1933 — a letter she wrote when she was already an acclaimed writer and a renowned reviewer — Woolf nevertheless phrased her anxiety of being accused of taking personal revenge for her lack of education by writing about women and their ages-long discrimination:

> I didnt write "A room" without considerable feeling even you will admit; I'm not cool on the subject. And I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious, legendary. If had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact — Well theyd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously" (Lee, 595 — mistakes in the original transcription)

Woolf's anxiety of "not being taken seriously" in her writings, has, one may infer from this passage, as much to do with her personal situation as a girl who had not been sent to college — and was therefore nursing a resentment of gender and economic injustice — as with her regret and discomfort at not having a university degree. Yet these two reasons do not exhaust the picture and Woolf's feeling of inferiority, irrational as it is, had at least one more source. It becomes more substantial when traced to the tradition in which the gender division in education had for so long been deemed natural and justified, and becomes even more pronounced when seen in the context of literary tradition. Woolf was indeed one of "Milton's daughters" in the sense given to this term by Gilbert and Gubar in their groundbreaking study, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 187–212).

> The story that Milton, "the first of masculinists," most notably tells to women is of course the story of woman's secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, and her exclusion from the garden of gods which is also, for her, the garden of poetry" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 191).

According to Gilbert and Gubar, it was precisely "[b]ecause Woolf was such a sophisticated literary critic [that] she may have been at once the most conscious and the most anxious heiress of the Milton culture myth" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 193); one of those female readers to whom Milton's misogynistic message, embedded in *Paradise Lost*, was "bruisingly real" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 199). Milton's affinity with the revered, omniscient sages "like Tiresias, Homer, and God" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 211) and his lineage being part of the Classics is another elementary association to make in the context of this essay. As Gilbert and Gubar explain:

> *Paradise Lost* is the "most remarkable Production of the world," Keats dryly decided in one of his more anti-Miltonic moments, because of the way its author forced a "northern dialect" to accommodate itself "to greek and latin inversions and intonations." But not only are Greek and Latin the quintessential languages of masculine scholarship (as Virginia Woolf, for instance, never tired of noting), they are also the languages of the Church, of patristic and patriarchal ritual and theology. Imposed upon English, moreover, their periodic sentences, perhaps more than any other stylistic device in *Paradise Lost*, flaunt the poet's divine foreknowledge. When Milton begins a sentence "Him the Almighty" the reader knows perfectly well that only the poet and God know how the sentence — like the verse, the book, and the epic of humanity itself — will come out in the end. (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 211)

Given that it is not easy to forget the thundering message conveyed in such a powerful voice, the contrast between Auden's "The Greeks and Us," so different in the author's comfortable, expansive tone and Woolf's almost elegiac air of "On Not Knowing Greek" is striking. To Auden, who feels absolutely confident that he belongs to Greece, together with everyone else, "everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian" (Auden, 5). To Woolf who, like Auden, also uses the plural in her essay, we are all outside, divided from Greece by an unbreachable distance. The grief for Greece — for "the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind" (Woolf 1992b: 103) — born from, and at the same time disguising, entrenched gender exclusion, saturates every paragraph of her essay. The feeling of not belonging, endured with a stoic air of detachment, is nevertheless too much to bear in solitude: hence the all encompassing "we" — we who do not know Greek: nobody does (Woolf 1992b: 93). This "we" is defiant, if not desperate: Woolf would not suffer alone the exclusion from "all that is to be known" (Woolf 1992b: 105). By speaking in the plural and defiantly including everyone, Woolf transforms gender exclusion into a universal fate and banishes everyone:

> For it is in vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and

> ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. (Woolf 1992b: 93)

In the same paragraph, after this thunderous imposition of "secondness" on a cowering reader, come the words of an irrational love for Greece, which leaves the reader in no doubt whatsoever that Woolf belongs to the very same stock as Auden, after all. The difference is that he belongs "in there," whereas she writes from the perspective of someone who circles the place she knows she can never enter:

> All the more strange, then, is it that we should wish to know Greek, try to know Greek, feel for ever drawn back to Greek, and be for ever making up some notion of the meaning of Greek, though from what incongruous odds and ends, with what slight resemblance to the real meaning of Greek, who shall say? (Woolf 1992b: 93)

One may try to counter this passionate confession of inconsolable longing for Greece with "a stopper upon all emotions whatsoever" (Woolf 2005b: 97), that is, *Jacob's Room* and Jacob's disappointment with Greece upon his visit there. Yet, even in *Jacob's Room*, the disenchantment with "the Greek myth" (Woolf 2005b: 97) and the protagonist's accusation that "we have been brought up in an illusion" (Woolf 2005b: 98), are made powerless in the face of Jacob's own realization that "it's the way we're brought up" (Woolf 2005b: 98). In spite of its coming-of-age disillusionment, *Jacob's Room* confirms the sentiment that Greece is what is best in us. Woolf's generation belongs to those numerous generations brought up to love Greece, even if the Greece they come to look for is not there anymore, replaced with its modern version in "ramshackle condition" (Woolf 2005b: 98). Jacob's story rather confirms that those who were brought up with a classical education can no more renounce Greece than renounce their childhood and youth, because this infatuation with Greek culture is precisely what being free and full of energy and "being at the top of the world" means:

> 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, including Chinese and Russian …, 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. Civilisations stood round them like flowers ready for picking. Ages lapped at their feet like waves fit for sailing. And surveying all this, looming through the fog, the lamplight, the shades of London, the two young men decided in favour of Greece.
> 'Probably,' said Jacob, 'we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant.' (Woolf 2005b: 57).

This feeling — to be "the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant" — is, with all its naiveté, narcissism and preposterousness, the quintessence of youth. The moment when one wakes up from this infatuation and labels it "the

Greek myth," one leaves youth behind. And so Greece and youth are intertwined in *Jacob's Room* to the extent that one is the key and byword for the other:

> 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, especially on leaving crowded rooms, or after a surfeit of pint, or when the moon floats among the waves of the hills, or in hollow, sallow, fruitless London days, like a specific; a clean blade, always a miracle. 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 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 … (Woolf 2005b: 57)

To Jacob, who has not been there yet and furnishes it in his imagination, the Acropolis is like the lighthouse to James Ramsay: this almost magical lantern he longed to see as a child, and when he sees it some years later he realizes that "it was a stark tower on a bare rock" (Woolf 2002: 150). Greece seems to be one of those "imaginary homelands" — to use Rushdie's phrase for an India distorted by memory, longing and the passage of time (Rushdie 1991: 10). Auden puts it simply that there is no Greece, but "different Greeces" (Auden, 4), varying from nation to nation, and from person to person. Nonetheless, the importance of Greece — imagined if not real — for Woolf's generation, exacerbated for the daughters of educated men by the feeling of exclusion from the education in the classics which their brothers received, could be, I think, at least the trope, if not the source, of Woolf's aural hallucinations of birds singing in Greek:

> She recalls these hallucinations in her 1922 memoir "Old Bloomsbury." Here she says that in 1904 Vanessa moved the family into Gordon Square "while I had lain in bed at the Dickinsons' house at Welweyn thinking that the birds were singing Greek choruses and that King Edward was using the foulest possible language among Ozzie Dickinson's azaleas." Leonard Woolf mentions these Greek-talking birds twice in his autobiography, but gives the impression they might have featured in later breakdowns. Quentin Bell says of her 1904 breakdown that "it was here that she lay in bed, listening to the birds singing in Greek and imagining that King Edward VII lurked in the azaleas using the foulest possible language." … And there follows the most notorious sentence in his biography, "All that summer she was mad." And so the Greek-talking birds settle in as verified, striking features of her "mania." But they don't quite fit the usual pattern of auditory hallucinations in mania, which are usually either grandiose or paranoid. They sound romantic rather than horrifying, like the bird Wagner's Siegfried suddenly finds he can understand, or the talking fish in Yeat's "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland." (Lee, 191)

The Greek-talking birds feature not only as a memorable detail of Woolf's mental breakdown or "madness"; they would later become, in the descriptions of Septimus's madness in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "a very useful, rich, literary hallucination" (Lee, 192). Lee goes on:

> Their possible meanings have been much debated. Perhaps they invoke her sexual fears. (After all, George Duckworth interfered with her during her Greek lessons, and the Greek nightingale Philomena is singing of rape.) Perhaps the reference to Edward VII alludes to Sir Leslie Stephen's doctor in his last illness, who was also Edward VII's doctor (this, though ingenious,

> doesn't quite seem to cover the obscenities in the azaleas). Perhaps the birds are phallic images and "King Edward, who is a father-figure, stands for Leslie's 'incestuous' invasiveness." Or perhaps, if her hallucination occurred in 1913 rather 1904, it is Thoby (with whom she had such strong Greek associations) who is in her mind. (Lee, 192)

It seems plausible, however, in the light of what I said before, that the Greek-speaking birds stand for Greek-speaking men: the educated fathers of uneducated daughters, the educated brothers of uneducated sisters. Were they not, from the point of view of a home-bound girl, free, independent and inaccessible like birds chattering in the trees? Did they not, at the end of the summer, leave, flying away to distant schools, not separately, but in flocks, *and* to learn Latin and Greek? Boys as birds or birds as boys is not an uncommon image in Woolf's prose: "She had been waked by the birds. How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choirboys attacking an iced cake" (Woolf 2005a: 931). Admittedly, one could quote other passages in which women as well as men are compared to birds, but nevertheless the association of men with birds seems to have a different, more disturbing overtone.

The most characteristic feature of a bird, its beak, is the specific attribute of male characters in two haunting and curiously similar episodes in two of Woolf's novels: *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Between the Acts* (1941). In both Woolf recounts the shock and horror of a child who witnessed a man's dominance over others: be it a wife, a child, maids, a dog, or even nature itself. In both scenes it is the beak — respectively, "a beak of brass" (Woolf 2002: 27–28) and "a beak of paper" (Woolf 2005a: 932) — that is the dominant attribute of maleness. In *To The Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay is described as if plunging like "a beak of brass" (Woolf 2002: 27–28) into the fountain of life, whose source is the child's mother, and smiting the fruit tree — again a metaphor of the mother. In *Between the Acts*, the sudden appearance of a grandfather equipped with a beak made of a piece of paper, with his hound over which he displays his absolute authority, brutally smashes the little child's epiphany of meditative concentration on the flower and the tree:

> The flower blazed between the angles of the roots … It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. Then there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.
> 'Good-morning, sir,' a hollow voice boomed at him from a beak of paper.
> The old man had sprung upon him from his hiding-place behind a tree.
> 'Say good-morning, George; say, "Good-morning, Grandpa",' Mabel urged him, giving him a push towards the man. But George stood gaping. George stood gazing. Then Mr Oliver crumpled the paper which he had cocked into a snout and appeared in person. (Woolf 2005a: 932)

Besides the recurring association of men with birds, there is yet another possible implication of this striking image of Greek-talking birds (see also Woolf

1992a: 138; Woolf 2004: 93). Hermione Lee mentions Wagner's Siegfried who can understand a bird's song (Lee, 191), but this special gift of understanding the language of birds predates Wagner — long before Siegfried it had been granted to Tiresias. Although Wagner's operas were important to Woolf (Marcus 1987: 36–56), so was *The Odyssey*, Sophocles' dramas and Greek mythology. One among those well known things about Tiresias is that he was a renowned seer, that he was blind, that he could understand the language of birds,[2] that he was a woman for some time,[3] and that he lived for several human generations.[4] Two of these characteristic features reappear in the character of Woolf's Orlando, who was immune to the passage of time and who also switched sexes in the course of his/her life. The model-figure of Tiresias to Woolf's character in *Orlando* has, of course, been noted. Yet, the particular extent of this influence is open to interpretation because it is difficult to decide whether Woolf proposes a playful fantasy based loosely on the myth of Tiresias or counters this myth with her revisionist version.[5] For my purposes, however, it suffices to point out that *Orlando* is as much the story of Vita Sackville-West as a re-telling of the story of Tiresias. Another Tiresias-modeled character in Woolf's fiction is Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. His "madness" encompasses three elements which were also attributed to Tiresias. The reader gets to know that Septimus suffers from prophetic thoughts he feels compelled to spread: "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened" (Woolf 2003: 18). In these moments when he sinks into madness, Septimus dwells among the shadows of the dead (Woolf 2003:

[2] "Some say that Athene, who had blinded him for having inadvertently seen her bathing, was moved by his mother's plea and, taking the serpent Erichthonius from her aegis, gave the order: 'Cleanse Teiresias's ears with your tongue that he may understand the language of the prophetic birds'" (Graves 1990: 10).

[3] "Others say that once, on Mount Cyllene, Teiresias had seen two serpents in the act of coupling. When both attacked him, he struck at them with his staff, killing the female. Immediately he was turned into a woman, and became a celebrated harlot; but seven years later he happened to see the same sight again at the same spot, and this time regained his manhood by killing the male serpent. Still others say that when Aphrodite and the three Charites … disputed as to which of the four was most beautiful, Teiresias awarded Cale the prize; whereupon Aphrodite turned him into an old woman" (Graves, 11).

[4] "Some days later Hera began reproaching Zeus for his numerous infidelities. He defended them by arguing that, at any rate, when he did share her couch, she had the more enjoyable time by far. 'Women, of course, derive infinitely greater pleasure from the sexual act than men,' he blustered. 'What nonsense!' cried Hera, 'The exact contrary is the case, and well you know it.' Teiresias, summoned to settle the dispute from his personal experience, answered: 'If the parts of love-pleasure be counted as ten, / Thrice three go to women, only one to men.' Hera was so exasperated by Zeus's triumphant grin that she blinded Teiresias; but Zeus compensated him with inward sight, and a life extended to seven generations" (Graves, 11).

[5] See Gilbert and Gubar's commentary on Tiresias in Woolf's *Orlando* (Gilbert and Gubar 1989: 345) and Tiresias in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Gilbert and Gubar 1989: 339).

18, 52–53, 69) like Tiresias in Hades.[6] With the dead hovering in his proximity, he listens to the sparrows singing in Greek and he can understand them (Woolf 2003: 18). By these glimpses we can see that Septimus is turning into Tiresias — into his unrecognized, modern incarnation. Taking into account how brilliantly Woolf rendered the gist of a penal-medical discourse in the description of a doctor Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf 2003: 73–75) — "a political reading, ahead of Foucault, of the conspiracy between social engineering, the restraint of the mentally ill, and the patriarchal self-protection of the establishment" (Lee, 189) — Woolf seemed to be acutely sensitive to the discourse of madness. By fashioning Septimus on the model of Tiresias, she poses a question about the attitude to insanity in Greek times and ours, namely, what would happen to Tiresias if he were born in present-day England? He would be locked away, probably, and advised a "resting cure" in one of Sir Bradshaw's "homes."

Woolf seems to be continuously haunted by Tiresias, even more so than T.S. Eliot, who made Tiresias "the most important personage" in *The Waste Land*, "uniting all the rest" (Eliot 1964: 70). In "Notes on *The Waste Land*," Eliot writes: "What Tiresias *sees* is, in fact, the substance of the poem" (Eliot, 70). Whereas the evoking of Tiresias in *The Waste Land* is an open one, and brought to the attention of the reader, Woolf's references to this mythical character are oblique. Nevertheless, these occasions when she seems to refer to Tiresias — like the madness of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the story of the time-immune, sex-switching Orlando, and the episode of killing the snake in *Between the Acts* — suggest the continuous inspiration of the figure of a Greek seer. This trope brings one back to the "not-knowing-Greek-sadness" again. If Tiresias understands birds, they must be singing in Greek. When an education in the classics is reserved for boys, understanding birdsong is magic, a kind of wisdom accessible to men only. Woolf was so intent on studying Greek in her youth, because it constituted the link with her favorite brother, Thoby, from whom she was afraid to be separated (Lee, 115, 142, 224). The line which was threatening to draw them apart, intellectually at least, was drawn in Greek; knowing Greek meant crossing this line and sharing the same intellectual space again. But studying Greek was Woolf's own choice and determination; not something that was to be taken for granted. For someone born a girl

[6] In *The Odyssey* Teiresias dwells "in the realms of darkness and of death" (*The Odyssey*, 149) and here Ulysses comes to consult him about the fate of his journey home (*The Odyssey*, Book XI: "The Descent into Hell"). Even after his death, Teiresias has not become the shadow, but — as the only dweller of Hades — has retained his memory, knowledge, and his prophetic powers. He lives as if a living soul among the shadows of the dead: "[T]he Theban bard, deprived of sight; / Within, irradiate with prophetic light! / To whom Persephone, entire and whole / Gave to retain the unseparated soul: / The rest are forms, of empty other made; / Impassive semblance, and a flitting shade." (*The Odyssey*, 149) We know that, on her reading of *The Odyssey*, Woolf has found this passage especially enthralling; her commentary in a "Greek notebook" conveys this rapture: "The souls of the dead cluster round, but Odysseus will not let them touch the blood, until Tiresias has spoken. Beautiful, beautiful!" (Lee, 142).

and excluded from a classical education it would be easier to switch to another sex — for example, by killing a snake like Tiresias did — than to ever understand birds. When, during her mental breakdown, Woolf imagined birds singing in Greek, she might have had Tiresias on her mind.

In *Between the Acts* the reference to Tiresias is as singular as the reference to Greece: the latter is evoked in the English countryside by the presence of a barn. The somehow unexpected comparison of an old barn to a Greek temple — underlined again after the scene of the killing of a snake — as well as the barn's temporal affinity to the church, is part of its description at the beginning of the novel:

> The barn … was a great building in the farmyard. It was as old as the church, and built of the same stone, but it had no steeple. It was raised on cones of grey stone at the corners to protect it from rats and damp. Those who had been to Greece always said it reminded them of a temple. Those who had never been to Greece — the majority — admired it all the same. (Woolf 2005a: 938)

The hidden drama, just one of many in the novel, played in the interiors of characters' minds and on the margins of an amateur play attended by the entire neighborhood, centers on the hostility felt by Giles — the local host — to one of the newcomer spectators, the homosexual William Dodge, who, troubled and deeply unhappy, is furthermore hurt by Giles silent contempt. As the reader learns from William's interior monologue, it would be difficult to disparage him more than he already does himself:

> At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs Swithin; so I married; but my child's not my child, Mrs Swithin. I'm a half-man, Mrs Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me… (Woolf 2005a: 959)

As this passage implies, the snake Giles steps on and kills on his way to the barn is an intertextual reference to William Dodge, pointing to Giles's attitude toward a homosexual person, that is, his disdain and disgust.

The killing of a snake is a meaningful act in the light of Tiresias' story and suggests that Woolf may be indirectly invoking some other powers to intervene. By putting a choking, immobilized snake in Giles's path, Woolf might have been intentionally dispatching him on a transsexual journey, using the same method and a "door" that worked for Tiresias. To emphasize the meaning of the moment, and to bring it to the gods' attention, the image of a Greek temple is evoked again when Giles walks on, relieved from his seething anger by "action" (Woolf 2005a: 970).

> He took the short cut by the fields to the barn. … This dry summer the path was strewn with stones. He kicked — a flinty yellow one, a sharp stone, edged as if cut by a savage for an arrow. A barbaric stone; a prehistoric. Stone-kicking was a child's game. He remembered the rules. By the rules of the game, one stone, the same stone, must be kicked to the goal. Say a gate, or a tree. He played it alone. The gate was a goal; to be reached in ten. The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third himself (coward). And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same.
>
> He reached it in ten. There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive-green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in his mouth. The snake was unable to swallow, the toad was

> unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round — a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the barn, with blood on his shoes.
> The barn, the Noble Barn, the barn that had been built over seven hundred years ago and reminded some people of a Greek temple … was empty. (Woolf 2005a: 970)

What happens after Giles enters the empty interior of the barn "with blood on his shoes" and finds there a solitary "shaft of light like a yellow banner [that] sloped from roof to floor" (Woolf 2005a: 970)? Whatever happens, the readers' attention is swiftly diverted to tea and cakes in the crowded break before the next act begins. Still, *Between the Acts* evokes the feeling of stories within stories, entwined and encompassing each other and reaching far into the past. Woolf knew well that there was no such thing as "between the acts": in her novels, like in Greek dramas, people cross each other's paths unawares and one never knows when one enters someone else's story and becomes somebody else.

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