

## Haunting Europe: Some Modernist Uses of Hellenism

**Dr Vassiliki Kolocotroni (University of Glasgow)**

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Here's a clever visual gag: (modern-day) Greek contemplates (ancient-Greek) urn; or, as George Bush would have it, a Grecian contemplates an urn. The American photographer

who put this little scene together knew his Romantic poetry – I’m obviously thinking here of Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
 [. . .]  
 O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
 When old age shall this generation waste,  
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
 ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

The trick in Keats’s poem is that the urn may be a ‘silent form’, but of the kind that speaks: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty . . .’. The modern photographer’s composition, however, relies on the stony silence of the thing. The jokey echo, then, is a telling vignette: it stages the encounter between ancient and modern as a game between presence and absence: the urn, like the statues and the temples in the background, is empty and silent. Its stark simplicity is complemented by the ornate decorativeness of the modern Athenian’s dress. His colourful and striking presence and his rather bemused, but still distinctly contemplative look, refills the urn with meaning; or, at least, so the photographer would have us believe, as it is his gaze that connects the presence (of the modern Greek) and the absence (of the ancient spirit that would have lent the urn its content), and synthesises them into this *tableau vivant* of Hellenism. In this staged scene, man (animate being) and urn (inanimate object) are equally necessary, and they interact: the man is looking to animate the pot, as if about to conjure up a genie – the

spirit of the place, *the genius loci*, but look again and you see the urn looking back at the man, casting its own benevolent spell on the Greek descendant. We're both here and we're alive, or, there is still life in this still life.

So Keats was right, the urn can talk back. There is a certain amount of comedy in this conviction, but also a haunting, a light Gothic touch. And there is something of the Gothic in modern Hellenism: the coded, the spectral, but also the insistence that ancient dwellers, spirits or gods can't have abandoned these sites. In that sense, Hellenism is a desire for presence, yet, as we shall see, a desire forever thwarted in the melancholy confirmation of absence. Couched in a Romantic idiom, this desire, seated 'in the deep heart's core' (Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'), paradoxically becomes its own reward, as the yearning for what once was, for what may not have perished but simply become invisible, fuels the visionary impetus of the artist. The poet's conjuring trick is to turn his longing word into a spell: the promise of the gods' return. Here, an 'absence, deeply felt, is an augury of presence' (Kramer 1978: 494); thus is the Grecian urn reanimated, and the site revisited by antique bodies. This is clearly a Romantic trope: Keats's urn and nightingale, Psyche and Pan, Hölderlin's Hyperion, Rilke's Orpheus, Heine's 'The Gods of Greece' inscribe a nostalgia for the living word, for the presence originally contained in the name, or the work of art.

Early modernist poetry insists upon this nostalgia and adds to it an almost overwrought self-consciousness. Consider Ezra Pound's 1907 poem 'In Durance':

I am homesick after mine own kind,  
 Oh I know that there are folk about me,  
     friendly faces,  
 But I am homesick after mine own kind.  
 [. . .]  
 Aye, I am wistful for my kin of the spirit

And have none about me save in the shadows  
 When come *they*, surging of power, 'DAEMON',  
 'Quasi KALOUN'. S. T. says Beauty is most that, a  
     'calling to the soul'.  
 Well then, so call they, the swirlers out of the mist  
     of my soul,  
 They that come mewards, bearing old magic  
**Ezra Pound, 'In Durance', 1907**

The poet's precocious sense of (cultural) isolation and displacement is acted out in the deliberate mixing of idioms: the lyrical 'I am homesick'; the direct and almost unpoetic colloquial of 'Oh I know that there are folk about me, / friendly faces', alongside the aesthetic dictum ('S. T. says' - Coleridge) and, of course, the *coup*, Greek mixed with Latin: 'DAEMON, quasi KALOUN': 'God, thus they are calling'. The sentiment may be knowingly 'old hat', but the disjointed registers are modern, as is the assumption that there is power in 'old magic'. Pound's citing of the Greek word as a sign of that surge, then, suggests that a conjuration is still possible. In 'The Return', from his 1912 collection, *Ripostes*, the citing becomes a sighting/ a vision:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative  
     Movements, and the slow feet,  
     The trouble in the pace and the uncertain  
     Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,  
 With fear, as half-awakened;  
 As if the snow should hesitate  
 And murmur in the wind,  
     and half turn back;  
 These were the 'Wing'd-with-Awe,'  
     Inviolable,

Gods of the wingèd shoe!  
 With them the silver hounds,  
     sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!  
     These were the swift to harry;



staggered rhythm and the change of tense in the last two lines of the second verse: ‘These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe...”; as if the (fully-fleshed) return relies on the reiteration of what the gods *were* rather than on the certainty of what they still *are*. In a sense, however, this is a mock-hesitation on the part of the poet, suggesting less the humility of the epigone, the belated reveller, than the self-assuredness (and thrill) of the initiate: because it is *he only*, or certainly he amongst the very few of ‘his kind’, as he put it in ‘In Durance’, who can see, and by seeing, ‘unleash’ ‘the keen-scented . . . souls of blood’.

‘Friendly faces’ might tremble or laugh at this, but then, for Pound, they are sceptics, whose senses are dulled by bourgeois, Christian morality or rational single-mindedness; as he put it in an 1918 essay on myth:

The undeniable tradition of metamorphoses teaches us that things do not remain always the same. [. . .] The first myths arose when a man walked sheer into ‘nonsense’, that is to say, when some very vivid and undeniable adventure befell him, and he told someone else who called him a liar. Thereupon, after bitter experience, perceiving that no one could understand what he meant when he said that he ‘turned into a tree’ he made a myth – a work of art that is – an impersonal or objective story woven out of his own emotion, as the nearest equation that he was capable of putting into words. That story, perhaps, then gave rise to a weaker copy of his emotion in others, until there arose a cult, a company of people who could understand each other’s nonsense about the gods.

**Ezra Pound, ‘Arnold Dolmetsch’, 1918** (Pound 1954: 431)

And Pound found others who could understand ‘each other’s nonsense about the gods’. In the autumn of 1914, he visited Arnold Dolmetsch, a musician devoted to the revival of early music and commissioned a clavicord from him. The sight of bearded, bright-eyed Dolmetsch and his musical instruments brought about an epiphany; he left convinced that:

When any man is able, by a pattern of notes or by an arrangement of planes or colours, to throw us back into the age of truth, everyone who has been cast back into that age of truth for one instant gives honour to the spell which has worked, to the witch-work or the

artwork, or to whatever you like to call it. I say, therefore, that I saw and heard the God Pan.

**Ezra Pound, 'Arnold Dolmetsch', 1918** (Pound 1954: 431, 432).

Such sightings only confirmed what Pound already knew; in an essay on 'Psychology and Troubadours', drafted in 1912 (though first published in 1916), he put forward a method of 'visionary interpretation'. As he put it in a letter to Harriet Monroe (April 1913): 'It is what Imagination really meant before the term was debased presumably by the Miltonists, tho' probably before them. It has to do with the seeing of visions.' For Pound, the consciousness of some seems to rest, or to have its center more properly, in what the Greek psychologists called the *phantastikon*. Their minds are, that is, circumvolved about them like soap-bubbles reflecting sundry patches of the macrocosmos.

**Ezra Pound, 'Psychology and Troubadours', 1916** (Pound 1952: 92).

Once reactivated, Pound's *phantastikon*, then, allows the reanimation of the gods. The term itself, rendered in the original Greek, restores to the concept its necessary aura and re-casts 'the spell which has worked' in the past. Thus the minds and visions of those who are gone, return to haunt abandoned sites; for Pound, this return is the only possibility for the regeneration of the poetic word, the fleshing out of the dry bones of European culture. Pound's Hellenism, blended with equal amounts of neoplatonic and theosophical mysticism, is typically eclectic; a modernist 'witch-work', or, as he images it at the beginning of *The Cantos*, a ritualistic sacrifice, blood for ghosts, who are then able to speak.

Pound's experiments in the untimely art of metempsychosis would both fascinate and worry T. S. Eliot, fellow American poet-cum-arbiter of European culture. Eliot too had an eye for ghosts, though the spectre of the past was considerably more threatening

for him. He famously cast his anxiety of influence in terms of the artist's 'continual self-sacrifice'; this may stem from a recognition of belatedness and the need for humility before the 'ideal order' of the past, but it also involves a fear of being engulfed by the past. Eliot's 'hellenizing', then, is deeply ambivalent. In its highly coded uses, it aims to speak to the initiated (in the manner of Pound's cultish constructions) on the assumption (or, rather, presumption) that its multiple evocations will do the work of cultural restoration. Pound once called for 'a poetry where the reader must not only read every word, but must read his English as carefully as if it were a Greek that he could not rapidly be sure of comprehending' (cited in Scneidau 265), and similarly, Eliot's programmatic 'difficulty' was to be achieved partly through a Greek coating. But, whereas Pound used the descent into the Hellenic underworld as a figure for a *nostos*, a homecoming of sorts, Eliot saw in it horrific possibilities, for both the personal and the political.

As early as 1917, in the guise of J. Alfred Prufrock and his pathetic, fragile aliases in the *Prufrock* collection, Eliot speaks as if besieged by the presence of the past:

[. . .]  
 I am moved by fancies that are curled  
 Around these images, and cling:  
 The notion of some infinitely gentle  
 Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh;  
 The worlds revolve like ancient women  
 Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

**T. S. Eliot, 'Preludes', *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917**

Eliot's *phantastikon* (to apply Pound's term) throws up persistent images of 'suffering things', among which, the speaker, in his dislocated sensibility, seems to count himself.

This is set against the image of 'worlds revolv[ing] like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots', with its connotations of post-apocalyptic and perennial loss. 'Ancient'



rather than simply ‘old’ women compounds the sense of other-worldly sterility, while also, of course, gendering the eeriness of the past quite specifically; the Americanism of the word ‘lots’ grounds the more arcane ‘gathering fuel’, which, reinforced by the linking with the near-oxymoron of ‘vacant ’ adds to the jarring effect. Another poem in the collection evokes a similarly uncomfortable connection with the past:

[. . .]

I keep my countenance,  
I remain self-possessed  
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired  
Reiterates some worn-out common song  
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
Recalling things that other people have desired.

**T. S. Eliot, ‘Portrait of a Lady’, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917**

Unlike Pound and his ‘different kind of music’, the fact that ‘some worn-out common song’ carries with it ‘the smell of hyacinths across the garden / [and the recall of] things that other people have desired’, affords the speaker no epiphany or sudden, liberating illumination; quite the opposite, it threatens his ‘self-possession’ by making him painfully aware of the involuntary reflex of memory: rather than reawakening his senses to the hyacinth smell, it renders him even more passive and impotent, a vessel for vicarious desires.

In *The Waste Land*, both the desires and the vicariousness intensify to the point of histrionics. The echoing of ‘The horror, the horror’, Conrad’s line from *The Heart of Darkness*, used as an epigraph in the original draft of the poem, sounded melodramatically the alarm at the impending disaster of a culture about to unhinge itself. Its replacement, the Sibyl’s tired voice, invokes other horrors: the nightmare of primitive

rites, returning to haunt the already confused and emasculated present. In a hellenized reading, ‘April is the cruellest month’, the poem’s opening line, suggests both Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and the month of ritualistic regenerations, when ‘infinitely gentle/infinitely suffering things’, or daughters like Persephone return to earth and their mothers to tell tales of abduction and rape. Such a reading adds a paranoiac pattern to a poem which plays self-conscious games with its audience (witness Eliot’s tongue-in-cheek scholarly endnotes to the poem); but ‘the hooded hordes’, the sounds of ‘maternal lamentations’, the ‘falling towers’, all point to the fantasy of an imminent bloodbath, such as we’d expect at the climax of a Jacobean revenge tragedy (a genre that particularly fascinated Eliot). And the very idea of the waste land, too: yes, land of cultural refuse, ‘vacant lots’, where voices and bodies scavenge, but also the land laid to waste during Demeter’s agonising search for her daughter, Persephone.

The other two Greek figures to haunt the poem are the raped girl turned by the gods into a nightingale (Philomela) and the blind, androgynous prophet (Tiresias). Both are ciphers for the poet: echoing Ford Madox Ford’s observation that in the 1910s ‘a man of letters [was] regarded as something less than a man’, an ‘effeminate if not a decent kind of eunuch,’ Eliot implicitly identifies the modern poet with the androgynous peeping tom and, through the traditional association of poet with nightingale, with the brutalised Philomela too. This abject attribution pricks the bubble of romanticism and classicism; it also adds a sinister gloss to Pound’s ‘nonsense about the gods’ and their metempsychosis.

Of course, as is well known, the final version of *The Waste Land* owes much to the editorial genius of Ezra Pound, whom Eliot acknowledges as ‘*il miglior fabbro*’. According to studies of the earlier drafts, Pound tempered some of Eliot’s more overt

misogynistic imaginings, though, given Pound's own passionate appropriation of mythological maidens such as Persephone, it's more a case of the one-eyed man leading the blind. Eliot later confessed (credibly or not) that the poem was 'a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmic grumbling', but that only adds a psychological thread to the tapestry of suffering that the poem weaves. Less convinced than Pound of the possibility of a pagan resurrection (in art or life), Eliot creates a Hellenism of nightmare rather than nostalgia. As he observed once, in conversation with the Greek poet George Seferis, 'To go to Greece is as if to go in search of one's mother' (Seferis, *Dokimes* II, cited by Gourgouris 1990: 70); and that may have been too dangerous a quest for a poet so preoccupied with issues of originality and sexual difference.

But others had already gone to Greece and had returned with news of mother: the *Great Mother*. This news can't have helped Eliot's overheated visions of ancient visitations. Archaeological excavations in Athens, the Peloponnesus and Crete, by Wilhelm Dörpfeld and Arthur Evans, at the turn of the century, had yielded evidence of primitive matriarchal rituals, which opened shocking new vistas in the understanding of Hellenism. Here is how Jane Ellen Harrison, the classical scholar turned anthropologist and theorist of the origins of Greek religion recalled her first encounter with that inspirational ghost – she writes in 1925:

Somewhere about the turn of the century there had come to light in the palace of Cnossos a clay sealing which was a veritable little manual of primitive Cretan faith and ritual. I shall never forget the moment when Mr. Arthur Evans first showed it to me. It seemed too good to be true. It represented the Great Mother standing on her own mountain with her attendant lions, and before her a worshipper in ecstasy. [. . .] Here we have embodied the magical rite of the Mother and the Son, the induction of the Year-Spirit who long preceded the worship of the Father.

(Jane Ellen Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* 1925: 71-2)

This discovery provided concrete, visible proof, 'blood for the ghosts' that speculative, though magisterial and highly influential, works such as J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) had already conjured up in the late Victorians' imagination. In a trilogy of studies, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), *Themis* (1912) and *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921), Harrison identified the links and continuities between ancient ritual and classical Greek religion. Aimed at a popular audience, her *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913), emphasised the organic connection between the two practices, with a view to addressing questions 'vital to-day': 'in a word, [. . .] what the nature of art is and how it can help or hinder spiritual life' (Harrison 1913: v). For Harrison, ritual, in its original representations, and persistent reincarnations (across cultural, social and linguistic boundaries), concretely embodied the human life-force, what Henri Bergson had termed *durée*. More than vitalism, however, it was the existence of a world and a force before and behind the hierarchical, patriarchal world of the Olympian Gods that most excited Harrison; as she put it, 'The unseen is always haunting me, surging up behind the visible' (Harrison, *Alpha and Omega* 206). Or, as she admitted in her autobiography:

Great things in literature, Greek plays for example, I most enjoy when behind their bright splendours I see moving darker and older shapes. That must be my *apologia pro vita mea*. (Harrison 1925: 86-7)

That was her 'apologia' in more ways than one, as Harrison's work met with scorn and severe resistance outside the immediate circle of her like-minded colleagues. More recent reception of Harrison's work runs along very different lines; her place is now secure within intellectual histories of modernism and her influence on writers such as Eliot and

Lawrence and Woolf is deemed at least as equally important as that of Frazer and Jessie Weston. Feminist scholars, particularly, have begun to unearth in her Hellenism a clear though subtle narrative of a personal and political project.

For Virginia Woolf, Harrison was an emblematic figure, that rare thing, a woman scholar who dared to tread uncommon ground. In *A Room of One's Own*, her polemical piece on women's cultural entitlement, Harrison appears as one of Woolf's epiphanies:

Somebody was in a hammock, somebody, but in this light they were phantoms, only, half guessed, half seen, raced across the grass – would no one stop her? – and then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress – could it be the famous scholar, could it be J—H—herself?

**Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 1993: 15)**

Shadowy but talismanic, Harrison crosses the Cambridge ground as a creature from the deep. Woolf, addressing the young, hails the heroic pioneer and pays homage, a year after Harrison's death, to an indomitable spirit ('would no one stop her?'). Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press had published Harrison's *Reminiscences* in 1925, and her account of her love of Hellenism as a desire and a struggle would have certainly struck a chord with Virginia:

Some half century ago a very happy little girl secretly possessed herself of a Greek grammar. A much adored aunt swiftly stript the gilt off the gingerbread, with these chill cutting words: 'I do not see how Greek grammar is to help little Jane to keep house when she has a home of her own.' A home of her own was as near as the essentially decent aunt of those days might get to an address on sex and marriage, but the child understood. She was a little girl and thereby doomed to eternal domesticity. She heard the gates of the Temple of Learning clang as they closed. (*Alpha and Omega*; quoted in Stewart 1959: 5-6)

Woolf's writing abounds in representations of women frustrated in their desire to enter the 'temples of learning'. In *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922, the same year as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, anonymous women haunt the houses of culture:

The rain poured down. The British Museum stood in one solid immense mound, very pale, very sleek in the rain, not a quarter of a mile from him. The vast mind was sheeted with stone; and each compartment in the depths of it was safe and dry. [. . .] Stone lies solid over the British Museum, as bone lies cool over the visions and heat of the brain. Only here the brain is Plato's and Shakespeare's; the brain has made pots and statues, great bulls and little jewels, and crossed the river of death this way and that incessantly, seeking some landing, now wrapping the body well for its long sleep; now laying a penny piece on the eyes; now turning the toes scrupulously to the East. Meanwhile, Plato continues his dialogue; in spite of the rain; in spite of the cab whistles; in spite of the woman in the mews behind Great Ormond Street who has come home drunk and cries all night long, 'Let me in! Let me in!' (Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*: 94)

'I'd give ten years of my life to know Greek', says the young Mrs Dalloway in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). Keenly aware of the exclusive power the knowledge of Greek afforded those who were groomed as beneficiaries of the closed system of patriarchy and empire, Woolf raged at its hegemonic uses. In a subtle strategic move, she declared the 'unknowability' of the Greek language thus aiming a blow at the arrogant pretensions of generations of male scholars: Sophocles's choruses, she argued in 'On Not Knowing Greek' (1925), 'must be spelt out and their symmetry mauled' (Woolf 1992: 98); to understand Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* 'it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. [. . .] The meaning is just on the far side of language' (Woolf 1992: 99). Woolf wonders in that essay:

When we read these few words cut on a tombstone, a stanza in a chorus, the end of the opening of a dialogue of Plato's, a fragment of Sappho, [. . .] are we not reading wrongly? losing our sharp sight in the haze of associations? reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack? [. . .] We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page. We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live.

Nevertheless, it is the language that has us most in bondage; the desire for that which perpetually lures us back. (Woolf 1992: 103)

Woolf 'goes back to Greece' repeatedly in her writing, though invariably to suggest that the desire for the possession of the past is but a lack of understanding of the present. 'I intend to come to Greece every year so long as I live,' Jacob Flanders, the protagonist of *Jacob's Room*, writes to a friend: 'It is the only chance I can see of protecting oneself from civilization' (Woolf 1992a: 128). 'Probably,' said Jacob, 'we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant.' (Woolf 1992a: 63-64).

Greece is a strictly virile world in Jacob's imperial imagination; when in Athens, on the Acropolis, his epiphanic moment, what he came for, is spoiled twice, by the conspicuous presence of women (of both the fleshy and the stony kind):

And then looking up and seeing the sharp outline, his meditations were given an extraordinary edge; Greece was over; the Parthenon in ruins; yet there he was.

(Ladies with green and white umbrellas passed through the courtyard – French ladies on their way to join their husbands in Constantinople.) [. . .]

Jacob got up and strolled across to the Erechtheum. There are still several women standing there holding the roof on their heads. Jacob straightened himself slightly; for stability and balance affect the body first. These statues annulled things so! He stared at them, then turned, and there was Madame Lucien Gruvé perched on a block of marble with her kodak pointed at his head. [. . .]

'Damn these women – damn these women!' he thought. [. . .] 'It is those damned women,' said Jacob, without any trace of bitterness, but rather with sadness and disappointment that what might have been should never be.

(Woolf 1992a: 132)

Jacob's dream of solitude and an unimpeded view of the ancient panorama is rudely interrupted by the presence of uncomprehending, desiring things; what disturbs him there on that site is not the haunting of the past, but his own (and his culture's) false consciousness in presuming the right to bring the place to life. The statues, like the recalcitrant female tourists whom he scorns, refuse to be reanimated by his gaze. What he

experiences as sadness at 'what might have been' is in fact the silent resistance of the site/sight to reveal its secret. This is the silence of 'the Greeks' that Woolf celebrates elsewhere:

There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure. (Woolf 1992: 106)

Jacob is likened to a statue by adoring women in the novel, yet he is as cold to them as the Caryatids were to him on the Acropolis. A gulf separates ages and genders equally. Jacob Flanders never returns from his last visit to the Parthenon, and 'Darkness drops like a knife over Greece' (p. 154): the line suggests his death, but also that of a particularly male dream of Hellenism, perhaps one that the Great War precipitated. Here, of course, Woolf conflates the personal with the political, recalling Thoby Stephen, her younger brother who died of typhus a few weeks after the family's return from their first trip to Greece in 1906, an event which forged in her mind the link between Hellenism and loss. Hers, then, is an elegiac Hellenism, haunted not, as in the case of Pound and Eliot, by the threat or promise of the gods' return, but by the impossible desire of the present to find solace in the past. For Woolf, this is a gendered desire: sons experience it differently than daughters; the former have to come to terms with the necessary passing of an age of arrogance (represented by the patriarchal control over knowledge and poetry and art), while the latter have to trace in the silence and invisibility of the past new, not deathly but empowering, forms of expression. This too is an anxiety of influence, of course, as well as a kind of haunting; returning to the Acropolis in 1932, Woolf found that 'my own ghost met me, the girl of 23, with all of her life to come' (Woolf 1982: 90). This must



have been a poignant but comforting feeling, since for once the personal past was confirmed, with all its ghosts and absences.

For Sigmund Freud, the Acropolis experience was also a confirmation of self, but in a different way: Freud visited Athens with his younger brother Alexander, in the summer of 1904. On the boat from Brindisi he realized that among their fellow passengers was Wilhelm Dörpfeld, Schliemann's assistant and master to among other young scholars, Jane Ellen Harrison: 'Freud gazed with awe at the man who had helped to discover ancient Troy, but he was too shy to approach him' (Jones 1955: 26). Freud, a superstitious man by his own admission, will have surely taken the sighting of the famous archaeologist to be a good omen. The trip to Athens was fraught with peculiar anxieties, however. Freud analyzed the experience thirty-two years later, in a short piece that he presented by way of birthday gift to the French writer Romain Rolland, one of the European intellectuals whom he admired greatly.

As Italo Calvino has Marco Polo the explorer say to Kubla Khan the emperor, in *Invisible Cities*:

You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Freud formulated the question he put to the city of Athens with hindsight: why was he filled with gloomy premonition on his approach? Why did he experience a feeling of what he termed 'derealization' standing on the Acropolis?: '*What I see here is not real*'? (Freud 1964: 244). Freud's explanation at the time was that something akin to a splitting of the self occurred: as a schoolboy, Freud, remembered being doubtful of the reality of

Athens (the Acropolis figured like the Loch Ness monster in his youthful imagination), and when faced with the concrete yellow pillars of the Parthenon ('the most beautiful thing he had ever seen', as he put it to Ernest Jones), a side of him was shocked by the sight: 'so it really does exist!'. Another side of him was surprised at this feeling of incredulity, at the very idea that, at the age of 48, that doubt could have persisted in his mature mind. Yet, as Freud goes on to analyse the moment, he reaches the following conclusion: that what he experienced was 'a disturbance of memory and a falsification of the past' (Freud 1964: 246): because the truth was he had not doubted the reality of Athens; what he had doubted was whether he would ever get to see it with his own eyes.

A final throw of the memory dice decides Freud's game with the past: on the Acropolis, the Freud brothers met with their father's ghost. As Napoleon, during his coronation as Emperor in the Notre Dame turned to one of his brothers and remarked: 'What would *Monsieur notre Père* have said to this, if he could have been here to-day?' (Freud 1964: 247), so did Sigmund and Alexander conjure the memory of their father, the self-made Jewish man, as the ghostly presence that would confer the true validation of the symbolic achievement of their visit to the highest point of European civilization. The memory of the father diminished the self, in the form of a necessary humility, and the realization that they made it to Athens after all, without and, in many ways, despite him, added a disturbing layer of guilt:

The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of *filial piety*.

**Sigmund Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 1936**

For Freud, the Acropolis was haunted by signs of a double identity: the Jewishness of the Austrian father and the Hellenism of the European Fathers, among whom Freud, now writing in his eightieth year, counted himself. The shock was a confirmation and peace of mind was restored, though only after the critical intervention of psychoanalytical interpretation. Freud had analysed the episode before, in a letter to Jung in 1909; then he had attributed the feeling of unease to his Jewish predilection for mysticism, often expressed in very personal, coded superstitions. That he overcame that feeling of dread and survived the experience was presented to Jung as proof of the need for rational demystification of experience. In the same letter, Freud cautions Jung against the ‘spook complex’, which had led the younger colleague to hear the footsteps of poltergeist spirits in the sounds of creaking bookshelves:

I confront the despiritualized furniture as the poet confronted undeified Nature after the gods of Greece had passed away. Accordingly, I put my fatherly horned-rimmed spectacles on again and warn my dear son to keep a cool head, for it is better to understand something than make such great sacrifices to understanding. (Freud to Jung 218)

That he uses the Acropolis episode to tell the story of ‘despiritualization’ is poignant: Hellenism wins over mysticism, but only through a confrontation with ghosts.

Typically, Modernism meets Hellenism at the crossroads of memory and desire; virtual or vicarious, actual or remembered, Hellenism for the moderns doubles as a hermetic idiom in which a poetic, personal, psychological, political archaeology of the self may be articulated. ‘Archaeology’ is a very modern metaphor, suggesting excavation, discovery and display, in other words, an anxiety about *visibility* that I have argued particularly distinguishes modernist Hellenism. The desire for vision drives Pound’s invocation to the pallid gods, Eliot’s hooded hordes, Harrison’s sightings of the Great

Mother and Woolf's women on blocks of marble. There are signs of it too in Freud's arrangement of his personal space: according to the American poet H. D., who visited Freud in Vienna and London, he was like 'a curator in a museum, surrounded by his priceless collection of Greek, Egyptian, and Chinese treasures' (H. D. 1984: 116).

Apparently, his 'favourite' amongst them was a statue of Athena:

It was a smallish object, judging by the place left empty, my end of the semicircle, made by the symmetrical arrangements of the Gods (or the Goods) on his table. 'This is my favorite', he said. He held the object toward me. I took it in my hand. It was a little bronze statue, helmeted, clothed to the foot in carved robe with the upper incised chiton or peplum. One hand was extended as if holding a staff or rod. 'She is perfect,' he said, 'only she has lost her spear'. I did not say anything. He knew that I loved Greece. He knew that I loved Hellas. I stood looking at Pallas Athené, she whose winged attribute was Niké, Victory, or she stood wingless, Niké A-pteros in the old days, in the little temple to your right as you climb the steps to the Propylaea on the Acropolis at Athens. He too had climbed those steps once, he had told me, for the briefest survey of the glory that was Greece. Niké A-pteros, she was called, the Wingless Victory, for Victory could never, would never fly away from Athens.

**H. D., 'Writing on the Wall', 1945**

The small statue is a prized possession, but also a talisman, magical object that can comfort and cast a spell.

I shall conclude my own brief survey, then, with a reference to another European thinker's talismanic Hellenism: Martin Heidegger ends his account of his first travel to Greece, in 1962, with the following vision:

When on our last evening, after we left Dubrovnik harbour, the scarlet, burning sun was sinking in the sea, dolphins escorted the ship for a while. That was Greece's final farewell. As Exekias's cup, where dolphins swim furiously around Dionysus' airborne ship, exists within the borders of the most beautiful creation, so the birthplace of the West and modernity lies within its island nature and resides in memory. (Martin Heidegger, *Aufenthalte*)



Having meditated extensively on the departure of the Gods from Greece, the philosopher conjures the fugitives for his final flourish: the procession of real, modern, dolphins turns magically, poetically into art, or, rather, a cultural possession, because Exekias's celebrated masterpiece resides in Germany, of course, 'displayed behind an impeccably Neo-Classical façade in [Munich's] Königsplatz museum'. Like the empty urn of the American photographer, the cup of the European philosopher plays hide and seek with a ghost. Heidegger's de-animation of life into art makes the god's appearance possible, though only provisionally: Dionysus is seen *sailing away from Greece*. In his turn, all the

departing philosopher can do is contemplate the passing/absence and confirm the vision;  
his mediation a not so humble offering from the haunted to the haunting.