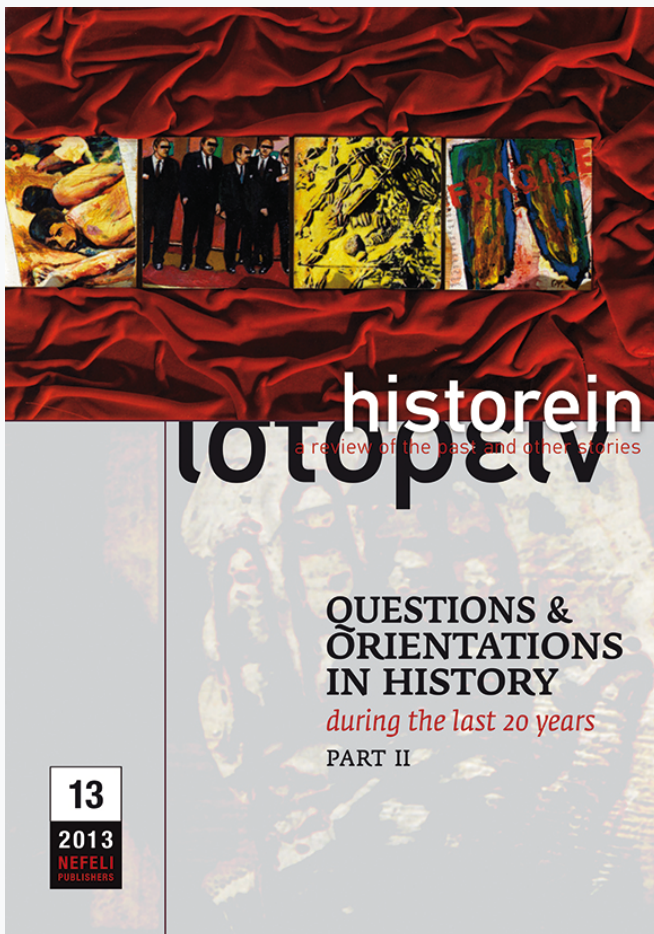


## Historein

Vol 13 (2013)

Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 2



### Review of Angeliki Spiropoulou's *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin*

Jana Funke

doi: [10.12681/historein.186](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.186)

Copyright © 2014, Jana Funke



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Funke, J. (2013). Review of Angeliki Spiropoulou's *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin*. *Historein*, 13, 98–101. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.186>

seen".<sup>1</sup> Hardi's book, essential as it appears to be in order to depict the effects and affects of a post-traumatic experience, has a pragmatism that deprives us of a more elaborated understanding of such horizons. Nevertheless, Hardi's work should be widely read because it is an original work providing a platform for further reflection about issues related to the relationship between the researcher and her object of study, the methodology used to approach sensitive matters related to war and conflict, and the need to voice gendered silence. My criticism should be understood mainly as an invitation to think again about how to address the devastating effects of power, even when silence might find a voice, and about how to make sense of current geopolitical conflict zones, both differently and more acutely.

#### NOTE

- 1 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 4.

### Angeliki Spiropoulou

*Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin*

**Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. viii + 240 pp.**

**By Jana Funke**

University of Exeter

Angeliki Spiropoulou's *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* examines Virginia Woolf's critical engagement with the past and innovative reworking of conventional historiography. Spiropoulou places Woolf's writings in productive dialogue with Walter Benjamin's theorisation of modernity and philosophy of history. In doing so, she offers an original account of Woolf's critical historiography, presents fresh readings of the wide-ranging engagement with the past in Woolf's fiction and develops important broader arguments concerning modernity and history.

As Spiropoulou reminds us, Woolf was fascinated with history from a young age and, in 1905, decided to write "a real historical work" (162). Even though her desire to write a "proper" history book remained unfulfilled, Woolf's essays, short stories and novels offered abundant opportunity for a critical reflection on historiographical practice and imaginative engagement with the past. Spiropoulou's decision to read Woolf with and against Benjamin yields fascinating insights into both writers' negotiation of the relation between past and present and the wider intellectual context they shared. Throughout her study, Spiropoulou remains alive to the differences between Woolf and Benjamin, but also demonstrates forcefully the many parallels between both

writers' understanding of history: the desire to challenge traditional historiography, to realise fully the aesthetic demands and difficulties of writing history and to use history to critique the social and political conditions of the present.

The first two chapters, "Modernity, modernism and the past" and "Theories of history, models of historiography", offer an excellent introduction to Woolf's and Benjamin's understanding of modernity and history and provide a tremendously useful overview of wider theoretical and conceptual debates. Spiropoulou demonstrates that Woolf, like Benjamin, was keen to investigate critically models of historical temporality and challenged the subject, method, sources and aims of conventional historiography. Woolf also reworked traditional conceptions of history as causal, linear, teleological and progressive, placing emphasis on the narrative quality of historical representation and favouring disruption and fragmentation over coherence and continuity. In doing so, she sought to distance herself from the historicist demand of a singular authentic or truthful knowledge of the past. In contrast, Woolf would place emphasis on the necessarily subjective interpretation of past events, insisting that the past can only ever be (re-)constructed by the individual interpreter and viewed through the lens of the present.

Spiropoulou shows that Woolf's modernist aesthetics and understanding of literary production were intricately related to her conceptualisation of history in a number of different ways. For instance, Woolf measured the present against the past to gain a sense of the specificity of the conditions of modernity while also seeking to realise the critical potentialities of the past in her fiction. Woolf's writing was shaped by her critical engagement with literary and cultural histories and traditions and her self-reflexive assessment of her own

place within such histories. Repeatedly, Woolf demonstrated her awareness that literature is bound to the historical context in which it is produced but can also act as a powerful force of critique and change.

In teasing out these implications, Spiropoulou points to the important relation between Woolf's aesthetics and her politics. Indeed, one of the most fascinating parallels between Benjamin's and Woolf's engagement with history is their shared desire to use the past to articulate a radical critique of the social conditions of the present. As her famous employment of the figure of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own* indicates, Woolf engaged creatively and imaginatively with history in a bid to draw attention to the losses, exclusions and omissions in official social, cultural and literary histories. In doing so, she sought to reveal gender and, more inconsistently, class inequalities in the present. This self-conscious and active use of the past in a bid to alter the present, to articulate emancipatory demands and to bring about a more inclusive and democratic future is key to both Benjamin's and Woolf's critical historiography.

The remaining six chapters of the book explore these and other ideas through a series of close readings, drawing on the whole range of Woolf's writings, including her essays and short stories, but focusing on a selection of her major novels, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *The Waves*, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. Even though Woolf's interest in history is apparent in many of her essays, Spiropoulou argues that Woolf engages most radically and experimentally with historiographical concerns in her fiction. For this reason, she seeks to extract and explore systematically Woolf's multifaceted and dynamic conceptualisation of history through a care-

ful reading of her novels in tandem with her shorter fiction and critical prose.

Chapter Three, "Antiquity and modernity: *Jacob's Room* and the 'Greek myth'", considers the way in which the modern age enters into a constellation with the classical past in Woolf and Benjamin. Spiropoulou explores Woolf's ambivalent relationship with classical Greece through the contradictory association of antiquity with permanence and transience. Reading Woolf's important essay "On not knowing Greek" together with *Jacob's Room*, the chapter shows that Woolf seeks to expose the myth of antiquity and its constitutive function with regard to modernity and gendered power structures. At the same time, she also wishes to reclaim the redemptive powers of the classical past to work against social exclusion, especially as it pertains to women. This use of the past once again illustrates Woolf's rejection of historical truthfulness or authenticity in favour of the creative and revolutionary possibilities of reimagining the past.

The next chapter, "Historical fictions, fictional fashions and time: *Orlando* as the 'angel of history'", deals with one of Woolf's most overtly "historical" novels. In *Orlando*, written on the borders of biography, historiography and fiction, Woolf calls into question many representative assumptions underlying conventional historiography, including the chronological unfolding of events and the supposed objectivity of historiographical writing. Instead, Woolf exposes that all historical knowledge is inevitably mediated through the perspective of the narrator situated in the present. Woolf also challenges conventional notions of progress; as the title of the chapter indicates, Orlando is here fashioned in the role of Benjamin's angel of history, disrupting and enriching the present with the fragmented memories of the past. As such, Woolf uses Orlando to reveal that con-

ventional ideas of progress are based on the exclusion and omission of "unwanted" aspects and figures of the past.

The relation between nature and history, memory and art is explored in Chapter Five, entitled "Natural history and historical nature in *To the Lighthouse* and other fiction". Spiropoulou reads *To the Lighthouse* together with *The Waves* and a selection of Woolf's short stories to discuss, among other ideas, the secular transience characterising both human and natural history in modernity. The chapter also raises important questions about the complex conceptualisation of change: nature itself came to be seen as a force of history and motor of change, but, at the same time, the historical and changeable were presented as natural and eternal. In her fiction, Woolf seeks to expose these dynamics, not least to denaturalise the supposedly 'natural' direction of human history and open up the possibility of a different future.

Related concerns about the direction and possibility of historical change are taken up in Woolf's more overtly political novels of the late 1930s, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. In Chapter Six, "Dreaming, history and the visions of the obscure in *The Years*", Spiropoulou suggests that *The Years*, despite its ostensibly "conventional" realism, in fact continues the critical historiographical project begun in *Orlando*. For instance, Woolf once again produces a narrative that is discontinuous and noncausal. Intergenerational dynamics are central to *The Years*, allowing Woolf to move away from a uniform view of history by exploring the complex and contradictory meanings the past can hold for individuals from several generations. In particular, Woolf deals with the question of how women belonging to different generations experience the demands of the past and the possibilities and restrictions

of the present. Woolf's lifelong preoccupation with the lives of the obscure is also reflected in *The Years*, a novel that views the forgotten and excluded figures of the past as the most significant agents of history. Thus, again, the constellation between the past (in this case, the more recent past) is put to use to fulfil its revolutionary potential.

Chapter Seven, "The stage of history: *Between the Acts* and the destruction of tradition", and Chapter Eight, "A 'common history': anonymous artists, communal collectivities", consider more closely Woolf's understanding of the role of the artist in imagining a common, shared past that makes possible a critique of the present and serves to construct a more inclusive vision of the future. Here, the act of writing history, which, for Woolf, is the task of the (female) artist, is conceptualised in explicitly political terms, which once again points to the strong similarities between Woolf's and Benjamin's appropriation of history. Miss La Trobe's use of seemingly random, incomplete and fragmented citations to reference the past, for instance, is read as an expression of Benjamin's quotational historiography, which allows Spiropoulou to offer a fresh take on the widely discussed pageant scene in the novel. The final chapter includes a discussion of Woolf's essay "Anon", part of the unfinished 'Common History book' she was working on towards the end of her life. Woolf's focus on literary history in this piece illustrates the centrality of art to her critical historiography and her desire to invest in the promise of a communal vision of past and future achievable in modern times through the work of art.

Overall, Spiropoulou's reading of Woolf in constellation with Benjamin makes possible a nuanced, sharp and original account of Woolf's philosophy of history. *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History* builds very successfully on previ-

ous scholarship dealing with Woolf and history and offers the first systematic and wide-ranging exploration of the aesthetic and political aspects of Woolf's critical historiography. The book is an important contribution to Woolf studies as well as literary modernist studies and historical studies more generally. It is also a particularly timely book in that the relation between gender, sexuality and temporality, especially history, is currently receiving renewed critical attention.