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Hellenism Unbound



Koulouris Theodore, Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf.

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Theodore Koulouris. *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011. £60 (Hb.)

The twofold denominator of Koulouris's recent contribution to the extensive relevant scholarship is Virginia Woolf's Greekness and her poetics of loss. In spite of the word "Hellenism" featured in the title of the book, Koulouris by and large refers to Woolf's involvement with Greek literature as "Greekness" (ελληνικότητα), since the term "Hellenism" is characterised by "academia and male homosociality" (7). Noticing the strong Greek undercurrent in Woolf's textual evolution, the critic sets out to explore "Virginia Woolf, the Greek" (3). Her poetics of loss is examined as closely related to a private, personalised, and solitary Hellenism, that informs Woolf's textual aesthetic as the result of her percipient understanding of mainstream nineteenth-century Hellenism, namely the "*specialized* domain" according to which classical Greece was seen part of "a certain academic discipline: the 'Greats', the classics" (6). Koulouris reads "a fruitful trope of significations" at work in the fact that Woolf tends to mention her Greek studies whenever she talks of "loss"—revealing both "the pervasiveness of death in her familial environment", and "a comprehensive account of 'dispossession' in relation to female struggle at the turn of the twentieth century" (71).

The initial part of the book, "Loss in the Making" (Chapters 1 and 2), examines Woolf's involvement with Greek as the first, if not primary, framework of intellectual anxiety and exploration. Drawing on elements of Woolf's life, the author traces the steps of Virginia Stephen to her original visit to Greece in 1906. Woolf traveled with her brother Thoby—from whom she first heard about the Greeks—and her sister Vanessa, but subsequently Thoby was taken terminally ill with typhoid. By that time, Virginia Woolf had already lost her mother, father, and half-sister Stella within a space of eleven years. Within a year of Thoby's demise, she reflected on her Greek studies in the unpublished seventy-nine pages manuscript titled *Greek Notebook*—the limited body of notes disproportionate to the diverse array of texts studied, ranging from Homer and Plato, to Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. In the pursuit of revealing the connection between Greekness and loss, Koulouris examines the *Greek Notebook* and situates Woolf within the general nineteenth and early twentieth-century tradition of British

Hellenism. Jacques Derrida's work on mourning, especially his linking of the concept of memory with the problematics of narrative is briefly discussed in order to frame Woolf's act of (textual) mourning: her mourning sought to invoke both "the memory of loss (the dead) *and* their identity as 'lost'" encapsulating "the wholeness of loss as an unavoidable element of life" (69-70). According to Koulouris, in Woolf, Greek stands for "a birth wound, a bottomless wound" much like that of Derrida's Hamlet—here perhaps the apt reference to the French philosopher would have proven more productive, had it been more elaborately analysed.

In Part 2, "The Greekness between Life and Text" (Chapters 3 and 4), Koulouris proceeds to explore the specifics of Woolf transforming the inherited nineteenth-century Hellenism into the private poetics he calls "Greekness," with Bloomsbury as the starting point and facilitator of Woolf's transition "from the identity of the 'Victorian daughter' to that of a respected novelist and essayist." The author relies on scholarship that considered Woolf's vision of Cambridge as "inseparable from the experience of exclusion" and as a model that "presupposes the passive female, taking on attitudes and ideas from the men around her" (Rose 34 qtd. in Koulouris 76). Bloomsbury homosexuality/homosociality draws on Hellenism to provide a counter-discourse to Christianity, in which Greece is made into "a new *locus* of socio-sexual identity with male desire (aesthetics) at its focus" (156). However, as Koulouris convincingly argues, Woolf's Greek readings and notes on texts illustrate her struggle with political and intellectual authority and the immanent opposition between private will and public keeping up with appearances.

The final part of the monograph (Chapters 5 and 6) introduces the ways Woolf's "Greekness" "can be seen both as a legacy of the female line of Greek, and as a private, autonomous textual and social impulse" (135). Koulouris reads a reluctance on the part of Woolf to "be accommodated within absolute binary formulations," a tendency that results in "discursive vacillation" between male and female codifications of Hellenism (135). In the socio-political context of the 1930s, Woolf displays a certain "distrust of feminism as a defining term of female struggle against patriarchy and fascism" (16). Having been excluded from the "male" line of Greek scholarship, Woolf develops a relation with the "female" line of Hellenism—largely responsible for the synthesis of 'masculine' Apollonian and 'feminine' Dionysian approaches to Greek literature—instilling in this heritage the poetics of dispossession and loss; at the same time she is reluctant to be part of the female

homosociality in colleges such as Manchester, Cambridge College, Newnhamor Girton, considering university education “a microcosm of paternal influence which preserved social inequities whilst stymieing the very nature of literary imagination” (168). Koulouris pinpoints the dialectical relationship between the binary oppositions of, on the one hand formal as opposed to domestic education, on the other public as opposed to private engagement in literature, art, and politics.

Woolf’s literary aesthetic is regarded in this book as “a conscious effort to intellectually position herself ‘in the middle of things’” (167). She vacillates between the classical/masculine and pre-classical/female aesthetic; she sways from restraint to spontaneity; she writes a space between “volubility” and silence, intellect and emotion (216). Woolf’s involvement with Greek scholarship is in the final analysis responsible for her overall intellectual ambivalence, her stance of *différance*, of deferring an ultimate, catholic, and immutable conclusion. Koulouris does not fail to acknowledge in his “Afterword” that the reader may be stuck by the plethora of binary oppositions presented in the book, thereby making clear that these oppositions cannot be examined in isolation by any homogenising means, but rather in their intricate entirety. Woolf’s textual aesthetic of “Greekness” should be regarded as the Derridean specter that is called upon and hovers over such binaries. In conclusion, *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf* contributes to Woolf scholarship not only because it provides a novel theoretical framework which re-constellates the literary production of Woolf along with several Greek canonical texts; more than that, it opens up a new space in academia for the exploration of how the impact of classical Greek literature has by and large pollinated the work of modernist authors.

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