

Why Phaedrus? Plato in Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room*

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Abstract

Recent criticism has addressed the Platonic and ancient Greek influences on Virginia Woolf's writings generally, and her novel *Jacob's Room* specifically, but there has been no accounting of the motivation for the specific use of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* in the latter novel. This essay will address how *Jacob's Room* engages closely with this dialogue not only with regard to thematic focal points of love and rhetoric, but also in terms of more encompassing structures of space and literary form. In the process, a less ironic approach to Plato and his philosophy than that argued for in much recent criticism comes to light in Woolf's complex negotiations with the precedent of Victorian Hellenism.

Virginia Woolf was a long-term admirer of the Greeks. She started studying Greek when she was seventeen, and later she read most of Plato's dialogues, six of them—including the *Phaedrus*—in the original.¹ This devotion to the Greeks can and should be contextualised in terms of the pervading Hellenism of the time, yet this does not mean that it does not constitute an interpretative challenge to critics of Woolf's work. Terry Eagleton homes in on this challenge when he quotes Woolf's claim, in *The Common Reader*, that Greek tragedy shows us “the stable, the permanent, the original human being”: this displays, he claims, “a robust essentialism which might disconcert some of her devotees” (Eagleton 2003: 27). Such pronouncements need to be squared with an evident scepticism, in Woolf's works, regarding just how universal the patriarchal culture of the Greeks really was.

Are the most distinguished accomplishments of ancient Greece really valid for Everyman? And do they address, in a satisfying way, the aspirations and experiences of every woman, too? Contrary to what one might be led to infer from Eagleton's dismissive glee, scholars have in fact in recent years shown an admirable pertinacity in grappling with how Woolf faced up to these questions. Many have paid particular attention to the English novelist's response to Plato. Over the last fifteen

¹ For an overview of Woolf's literary use of Greece, see Fowler 1999.

years there have been several fruitful discussions of the importance of either this Greek philosopher or Greek culture or language in general for Woolf (see Fowler 1999 and Nagel 2002). None of these try to argue away Woolf's very obvious admiration for Plato: Linden Peach, for instance, circumspectly points out that *Jacob's Room* "draws attention not to Greek culture as monolithic but to an interpretation of Greek art and culture as monolithic" (Peach 2000: 74).

Woolf's investment in questions relating to Greek culture is certainly evident in the novel *Jacob's Room*, and yet one question still remains unanswered: contemporary criticism has not really established why Woolf refers specifically to Plato's *Phaedrus* dialogue in this novel. Critics have conscientiously addressed questions such as "Why a Greek philosopher?" and "Why Plato?", but largely bypassed the query "Why *Phaedrus*?" Interpreters of Woolf have also frequently been tempted to simplify both modern literature and classical philosophy, for the sake of establishing rather straightforward contrasts between the two activities. Brenda Lyons, for instance, interprets the novel as an expression of "Woolf's longing for, yet mistrust of, Platonic verities" (Lyons 1994: 293). She claims "there is a kind of parody of the Platonic ascent from body to mind, as Jacob is transformed during the course of the novel from experience to idea" (ibid., 294). Here Lyons seems to be taking for granted a dogmatic understanding of Plato's dialogues as centred solidly around immutable ideas, setting aside the more sceptical kinds of readings that have not only characterised recent philosophical approaches to Plato (cf. Zuckert 1996), but which also were evident in Victorians such as George Grote, Walter Pater, and John Stuart Mill. She claims that "Woolf inserts the *Phaedrus* as a metaphorical touchstone by which to measure twentieth-century definitions of love, the soul, knowledge, identity and idealism" (Lyons 1994: 294). This provides a useful suggestion of thematic parallels between the two texts, but arguably overlooks how Woolf was not immune to what Frank M. Turner has described as the Victorian use of "Plato's moral and political philosophy to provide a more or less idealist surrogate for Christian social and political values" (Turner 1991: 374). It neither faces up to the overlap between Woolf and predecessors such as Benjamin Jowett, Richard Nettleship, Bernard Bosanquet and Ernest Baker, nor takes into account how "problems of skepticism and solipsism are [...] ingrained in the

Phaedrus' account of the knowledge available to the human soul" (Griswold 1996: 108).

A similar emphasis is evident in an impressive study by Emily Dalgarno, where the novel is read in light of Woolf's Greek studies. Dalgarno claims that *Jacob's Room* represents the beginning of "the critical examination of an ideology of beauty that the male who has been educated in Greek history and literature associates with female passivity" (Dalgarno 2001: 56). She agrees with Lyons when she states that Woolf's writings "do not engage with Platonic arguments but rather draw from the dialogs to inspire, complicate, and support her own aesthetic ends" (ibid: 59). Here one might counter that fiction seldom presents an argumentative structure like that found in a philosophical text, even while one queries whether literature's ends can be effectively summarised as being exclusively "aesthetic" ones. In addition, Dalgarno's tendency to see the Platonic dialogue as a solely argumentative entity eschews a more literary or dramatic understanding of Plato, of a kind that was already coming to the fore in the nineteenth century.

Jane de Gay's reading of how *Jacob's Room* relates to the literary past in general rectifies this bias, insofar as it places *Phaedrus* in the company of other intertexts—including works by Shakespeare and Plato's *Republic*—that are understood to constitute a literary heritage. Her interpretation, which combines a feminist emphasis on Jacob's patriarchal shortcomings with an acknowledgement of Woolf's respect for the Greeks, argues that "allusions to *Phaedrus* are carried over into the wider context of the book in a way that fulfils the elegiac function of suggesting that something of Jacob survives in others" (de Gay 2006: 81). Although it leads to a sensitively perceptive reading of the novel, de Gay's focus on isolated allusions remains, however, both piecemeal and removed from formal issues. A more broadly encompassing approach to the relationship between these two texts, involving both their aesthetic and argumentative dimensions, is required if one seeks to justify why Woolf makes use of *Phaedrus* rather than any other Platonic dialogue. It is especially important to establish why she does not utilise the *Symposium*—instead of the *Phaedrus* dialogue—given that there are thematic similarities between these two dialogues and Woolf had an expressed predilection for the *Symposium*.

The *Phaedrus* dialogue is named after Socrates' interlocutor in the text. At the outset there is an unusually detailed description of how the two of them encounter each other by accident outside Athens' city walls, and they sit down in the shade of a plane tree on the banks of the river Illisus in order for Phaedrus to recite the sophist Lysias' speech on the nature of love. Taking its bearings in an asymmetrical relationship where one person courts a beloved, his speech claims that "favours of love should be granted rather to the one who is not in love than to the lover" (Plato 1914: 415; 227c), due to the irrationality and jealousy of the lover. Unimpressed by Lysias' eloquence, Socrates first comes up with another speech based on the same premise of rational rather than passionate relationships. He soon repents what he believes to be an impious transgression against the god of Love, though, and the result is a recantation. In the third extended speech of the dialogue, a lengthy defence of love, Socrates' recantation defends love as a form of "inspired madness" that is provided for "our greatest happiness" (ibid.: 469; 245b). As part of a more encompassing allegory, he compares the soul to a charioteer with a pair of winged horses: a white one that leads one up to the heavens and spiritual truths, and a dark one that pulls the soul down to earth. For humans the struggle with the horses is an imposing one, and thus there is only limited access to the heights of heaven. Subsequently in the dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus discuss methods for the writing of speeches. Using the preceding speeches on love as examples, the second half of the dialogue turns to rhetoric, or the art of speech. Socrates convinces his interlocutor that knowledge of truth, rather than mere opinion, is necessary for a command of the art of speech. He also insists that a speech should have an inner cohesion "like a living being, with a body of its own" (ibid.: 529; 264c) and that the speaker can only persuade souls if he knows the nature of the soul. Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates uses a mythical story about the god Theuth to indict writing, comparing it unfavourably to the living word of speech. We are not told what consequence this indictment should have for the status of the written text in which it features.

In order to establish the broad relevance of the *Phaedrus* to Woolf's concerns in *Jacob's Room*, this reading will address not only the two main thematic focal points of love and rhetoric, but also the use of space and literary form in Woolf's novel. The one specific reference made to the *Phaedrus* is to be found at a crucial juncture a little over halfway

through *Jacob's Room*, where Jacob Flanders visits the British Museum Reading Room. Here several critics have drawn a relevant parallel to Woolf's feminist classic, *A Room of One's Own*—published in 1929, seven years after *Jacob's Room*—facilitating an interpretation of the novel on the basis of the later book's critique of the patriarchal basis of British culture. When the narrator of *Jacob's Room* evokes the privileged status of “Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Shakespeare” (Woolf 1992a: 93) in the reading room—as part of one collective, “enormous mind” (ibid.)—the absence of female figures in this canon is perhaps meant to be conspicuous. Yet Woolf greatly respected all the mentioned authors, and thus it is hard to read this passage in a completely ironic way. It is also far from clear how we are to interpret Jacob's reading of the *Phaedrus* dialogue that same night, after going from the museum. This is the central passage on that act of reading, which segues from an evocation of the collective mind of Western culture to a more specific situation:

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!’

In the street below Jacob's room voices were raised.

But he read on. For after all Plato continues imperturbably. And Hamlet utters his soliloquy. And there the Elgin Marbles lie, all night long, old Jones's lantern sometimes recalling Ulysses, or a horse's head; or sometimes a flash of gold, or a mummy's sunk yellow cheek. Plato and Shakespeare continue; and Jacob, who was reading the *Phaedrus*, heard people vociferating round the lamp-post, and the woman battering at the door and crying, ‘Let me in!’ as if a coal had dropped from the fire, or a fly, falling from the ceiling, had lain on its back, too weak to turn over.

The *Phaedrus* is very difficult. And so, when at length one reads straight ahead, falling into step, marching on, becoming (so it seems) momentarily part of this rolling, imperturbable energy, which has driven darkness before it since Plato walked the Acropolis, it is impossible to see to the fire.

The dialogue draws to its close. Plato's argument is done. Plato's argument is stowed away in Jacob's mind, and for five minutes Jacob's mind continues alone, onwards, into the darkness. Then, getting up, he parted the curtains, and saw, with astonishing clearness, how the Springetts opposite had gone to bed; how it rained; how the Jews and the foreign woman, at the end of the street, stood by the pillar-box, arguing. (ibid.: 94-95)

What relevance, if any, has this reference to the *Phaedrus*? The passage is nicely poised between inclusive and exclusive interpretations of Platonic dialogue. The remorseless nature of that dialogue seems, for a

long time, to be completely oblivious to the world outside it. Jacob's isolation in his apartment seems to mirror the Greek text's distance from what is going on at a street level, and the philosophy of love presented by Plato in the dialogue might seem to be implicitly accused of being an idealisation out of touch with the sordidness and pain of quotidian reality. This can be politicised: Jews, women and the poor would all cry "Let me in!"—while Plato and Socrates would always already be at home in the *polis*, like Jacob in his room, at liberty to roam outside if the fancy takes them. Such a reading ignores or tones down the final part of this passage, however. Due to the presence of such tensions, Brad Bucknell claims that the ending is open-ended: "Eventually," he grants, "Jacob does see what is outside, but it is never clear that he comprehends it in a complex way. The narrative suspends his perception, and we cannot be sure of his assessment" (Bucknell 2008: 772).

Yet perhaps one can go further than this, based on the fact that, at the end, Jacob's digested reading enables him to a vision of the world around him that is characterised by what is called "astonishing clearness." Woolf was taught Greek by Hester Pater, the sister of Walter Pater, and here Pater's reading of Plato as responsible for a "redemption of matter, of the world of sense" may be lurking in the background (Pater 2002: 131).² Pater was impressed by the formal freedom of Platonic dialogue, and compared it to the modern essay (cf. *ibid.*: 157-158). Woolf, too, admired the flexibility of Plato's use of form. In "On Not Knowing Greek," she claims: "All this flows over the arguments of Plato—laughter and movement; people getting up and going out; the hour changing; tempers being lost; jokes cracked; the dawn rising. Truth, it seems, is various; Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties" (Woolf 1992b: 101). Placed in such a context, the passage seems to be suggesting that the very form of Plato enables Jacob to an epiphany of reality rather than a narrow-minded selection or avoidance of it.

In her interpretation of this episode, Jane de Gay misquotes the final words of the penultimate paragraph as "it is impossible to see the fire" (De Gay 2006: 81). She argues that Woolf is alluding to Plato's cave parable in book seven of the *Republic*. Just as the unenlightened, according to Plato, are captured by images (represented by reflections

² Pater's relevance for Woolf's understanding of Plato is well addressed in Sim 2005.

behind a fire in Plato's parable), so is Jacob—in de Gay's view—“trapped in the ideologies of his upbringing, and does not notice the (metaphorical) fire which has been the source of his illusions” (ibid: 81). Contrary to such a reading, however, the text merely states that Jacob is neglecting a practical, everyday task—presumably, raking or taking care of the embers in some way—and not that he is unable to see the fire. One might in fact argue that the protagonist is neglecting the merely material image outside of himself (embodied in the fire) precisely because he already is immersed in the ideal realm of the mind (embodied in the book). Here Socrates' claim that the “truly existing essence [...] is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul” (Plato 1914: 475-477; 247c) is relevant, so long as one goes on to add that the Platonism of Jacob includes a return to a renewed and more insightful encounter with materiality. This would be in line with Socrates' insistence, in the discussion of the parable of the cave in *The Republic*, that the enlightened must be coaxed into returning to the world of illusion in order to instruct others (see Plato 2000: 225-226; 519c-520d). Reading Jacob's enclosed seclusion as completely negative also entails overlooking Woolf's stress on the necessity of tranquil isolation for intellectual activities, whether these are pursued in Jacob's room or the lodgings women might live to call their own: “The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fulness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtain must be close drawn” (Woolf 1996: 97).

When we are told that “The *Phaedrus* is very difficult”, does this imply that it is too difficult for Jacob? Given the persistent irony of the novel, it is hard to fully rule out such an interpretation. Despite his expensive education, Jacob is sufficiently obtuse for the narrator to later ask “how far was he a mere bumpkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow?” (Woolf 1992a: 135) On the other hand, the narrator declines to draw any clear conclusion as to the relative intelligence of her protagonist, insisting that it “is of no use trying to sum people up” (ibid.). In addition, Woolf in another context admitted that Plato's philosophy presents considerable challenges to all its readers:

It is an exhausting process; to contract painfully upon the exact meaning of words; to judge what each admission involves; to follow intently, yet critically, the dwindling and changing of opinion as it hardens and intensifies into truth. Are

pleasure and good the same? Can virtue be taught? Is virtue knowledge? The tired or feeble mind may easily lapse as the remorseless questioning proceeds; but no one, however weak, can fail, even if he does not learn more from Plato, to love knowledge better. For as the argument mounts from step to step, Protagoras yielding, Socrates pushing on, what matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it. (ibid.: 100-101)

This view contradicts Matthew Arnold's vision of the Greeks as a matter of sweetness and light: "Difficulties are kept out of view," he wrote in *Culture and Anarchy*, "and the beauty and rationalness of the ideal have all our thoughts" (Arnold 1993: 130).

As a modernist, Woolf is inclined to not only accept, but also to cultivate, complexity as a principle of form. As a successor to the Victorians, she is furthermore willing to acknowledge that the complexity of the Greeks may have something to do with the fact that they in many respects are very different from us. This topic provides some of the satirical bite of *Jacob's Room*. Early on in the novel, Jacob and his friend Bonamy quote snippets of Greek tragedy to one another during the later hours of Guy Fawkes' Night. They are confident of their own ability to fathom these texts: "'Probably,' said Jacob, 'we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant'" (Woolf 1992a: 64). This presumption of familiarity is accompanied by selective identification with an idealised version of Greek civilisation. Even in the middle of London, it seems to Jacob as if "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..." (ibid.: 64). In a short story written earlier in her career, "A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus," Woolf similarly parodies British tourists who claim that they, rather than the modern Greeks, are the true inheritors of the spirit of ancient Greece. In thus questioning the identification with Greece that was part and parcel of much of the ideology of the British Empire, Woolf's position is attuned to more general intellectual trends, the more scholarly versions of which have been summarised by Richard Jenkyns. The latter refers to "a change in the nature of Greek scholarship in England, starting with James Frazer, continuing with the writings of Jane Harrison and Gilbert Murray, and further encouraged by the belated impact of Nietzsche in the first decade of this century." These figures "inspired a chastening sense

of our own limitations; we are better aware than our ancestors of the gulf that separates us from antiquity” (Jenkyns 1980: 343).

Jacob’s Room is a novel of gulfs and gaps at several different levels. In the passage describing Jacob’s reading of the *Phaedrus*, which I discussed earlier, there is effectively a large distance—both in terms of history and world-view—between the original text and its modern readers. No textual details of the *Phaedrus* are addressed there, and figures such as Socrates and Phaedrus do not appear—let alone Lysias or, say, the allegorical flights of Socrates’ recantation. It is, further, hard to identify the remorseless, almost military, momentum of the text described by Woolf with the meandering and unpredictable movement of the *Phaedrus* itself. Effectively, the text has been silenced and shunted aside in favour of the concrete context of its reception in Jacob’s own quarters. As such, we are however not far removed from the arbitrariness of writing as discussed in the final section of Plato’s dialogue. It is in fact possible, then, to see this departure from the original as illustrating, by way of detour, something of the spirit of the original.

The suspicion that something like this is taking place is strengthened by the fact that Woolf’s novel arguably alludes to Socrates’ critique of writing at other junctures. The first instance of this occurs in connection with a description of inner city alienation, as passengers in buses do not even attempt the vain pursuit of each other’s inner thoughts: “Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart, and his friends could only read the title” (Woolf 1992a: 53). A more extensive use of the same metaphor, even more in line with Socrates’ version, is found in a passage on the passengers of the urban subway:

Beneath the pavement, sunk in the earth, hollow drains lined with yellow light for ever conveyed them this way and that, and large letters upon enamel plates represented in the underworld the parks, squares, and circuses of the upper. ‘Marble Arch—Shepherd’s Bush’—to the majority the Arch and the Bush are eternally white letters upon a blue ground. Only at one point—it may be Acton, Holloway, Kensal Rise, Caledonian Road—does the name mean shops where you buy things, and houses, in one of which, down to the right, where the pollard trees grow out of the paving stones, there is a square curtained window, and a bedroom. (ibid.: 55-56)

To make one’s way through the city is to forge a path through a jungle of empty signifiers, devoid of the familiarity and significance of everyday life. Language has become something alien and obstructing.

In Plato's dialogue, Socrates identifies a clear hierarchy between writing and "the living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called the image" (Plato 1914: 567; 276a). This opposition is also at work in *Jacob's Room*, as the novel's uneasiness with writing becomes most explicit and most pronounced in the vicissitudes of Jacob's relations to his mother, Betty Flanders. As she is stuck in Scarborough, far from her offspring, Mrs. Flanders' epistles to her son inevitably fail to have the same effect on him that the more tangible, and less salubrious, contact with his urban friends and lovers has. Her frustrated attempts at real communication lead Woolf to a Proust-like mini-essay on the ontology of letters. "Let us consider letters," she writes:

—how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark—for to see one's own envelope on another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. [...] Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost. (Woolf 1992a: 79)

Here Woolf's literary response to Plato's philosophy is not a metaphorical improvisation on an argumentative basis, but rather the literalisation of a metaphor. Where the *Phaedrus* uses the parent-child relation as a metaphor for the fragility of writing—as an offspring of its writer's mind that "always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself" (Plato 1914: 567; 275e)—Woolf's novel makes that same relation the concrete stuff of its life.

Plato is of course not only preoccupied with the ontology of communication, but also the ethics of language. What the ontologies of certain media might make possible is important enough in itself, but the motivation lying behind their actual use is an equally important, if not even more vital, matter. In *Listening to the Cicadas*, Ferrari explains the contrast as follows:

Plato takes pains to set this relatively straightforward point about the characteristic tendencies of written as opposed to oral formats (namely, that the written tempts us more forcibly to make a fetish of original performance) against the larger contrast of which it is only one manifestation: that between the concerns of the impresario and those of the philosopher—the one content with the mere effect of fine words, the other seeking the life which gives those words importance. (Ferrari 1987: 212)

Similarly, *Jacob's Room* is not exclusively interested in the impersonal mechanisms of modern life, but also the conscious decisions that facilitate or obstruct meaningful communication. This is especially noticeable during Jacob's time at Cambridge, where the don Sopwith puts down his old friend or student "Chucky" Stenhouse with patronising malevolence. At university, Jacob feels like a privileged inheritor of the past: "the sound of the clock conveying to him (it may be) a sense of old buildings and time; and himself the inheritor" (Woolf 1992a: 36). Yet for the narrator this is a place of empty words: "Talking, talking, talking—as if everything could be talked" (ibid.: 32). Like Phaedrus, the inhabitants of this place are more interested in the enjoyment of words for their own sake, than any ends beyond them. The novel's version of university life echoes Woolf's description, in her diary, of G. E. Moore as suffering "A lack of mass, somewhere... I dont [sic] see altogether why he was the dominator & dictator of youth. Perhaps Cambridge is too much of a cave."³

Political rhetoric of war is perhaps less insular in its effects than that of the university, but in *Jacob's Room* that does not mean that it is less prone to abuse or obfuscation. Towards the end of the novel, a pro-war demonstration passing by the Monument in the centre of London is presented in a detached, inscrutable manner, and the same treatment is also meted out to a crucial cabinet meeting where Asquith's government decides to embark upon what would become World War I. The jingoism of that war is however less evident here than in Woolf's subsequent novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, or her later tract *Three Guineas*. Instead, *Jacob's Room* sticks closer to the precedent of Plato by scrutinising the rhetoric of love. Like several other novels, Woolf's novel traces—through the friendship between Jacob and the homosexual character Bonamy—some of the homosocial undercurrents prevalent in the British Hellenism of this time.⁴ But the main focus is on a series of heterosexual love affairs involving Jacob Flanders, which not only raise the issue of sexually motivated rhetoric, but also deal with the kind of asymmetrical forms of love specifically dealt with in the *Phaedrus*.

Insofar as the *Phaedrus* shows us, in Martha Nussbaum's words, that "the best kind of love, the kind that loves the individual for what he or

³ Woolf, *Diary*, II, 23 June 1920, 49, quoted in Woolf 1992a, 164, n. 29.

⁴ On this theme in the fiction of the period, see Cole 2003.

she really is, is a love of character and values" (Nussbaum 1990: 331), Jacob's brief life yields a dearth of meaningful, amatory relationships. Rather than attaining one constant and edifying relationship, he drifts from one love interest to another during the novel. Jacob is distant and non-committal in his relationships with Florinda and Fanny Elmer, and distracted in his inconclusive courting of Clara Durrant. Arguably, in all of these encounters Jacob is a non-lover of the sort portrayed in the first speeches of the *Phaedrus*: someone who seeks gratification and pleasure, but is not passionately engaged in the object of his affections. The ironical twist of the novel is that the tables are turned on Jacob during his visit to Greece: the married, middle-aged woman Sandra Wentworth Williams may appreciate both Jacob's classic, statuesque beauty and his attentions, but both she and her husband are fully aware from the start that this is only one out of a series of conquests on her part. As she thinks towards the end of the book, "Jacob would be shocked" (Woolf 1992a: 149) if he knew how superficial her commitment really is.

Sue Roe has argued that Jacob loses direction in his life due to his inability to control his own desire (cf. Roe 1992a: xxx). In the Penguin edition of the novel, she helpfully points out that a passage where a horse runs loose in Hyde Park ("a horse galloped past without a rider"; Woolf 1992a: 147) can be read as an allusion to Socrates' comparison of the soul to a chariot with two horses (see also de Gay 2006: 82). Certainly, Jacob's relationship with Mrs. Williams is not a beneficial one for him. She is portrayed as a rather decadent aesthete, searching for brief epiphanies of beauty—and craving recognition of her own charm and attractiveness. She thus not only provides the final example of the pitfalls of an asymmetrical form of love in the novel, but is also the vehicle for a critique of aestheticism. The latter critique arguably entails another engagement with Plato's heritage. As Woolf puts it explicitly in her essay "On Not Knowing Greek": "we must beware. Socrates did not care for 'mere beauty', by which he meant, perhaps, beauty as ornament" (Woolf 1992b: 102). Dwelling upon a superficial, passing kind of beauty rather than an aesthetic experience that might contribute to a purposeful life, Mrs. Williams effectively derails Jacob from any real insight. At one stage we are told that she is "floating from the particular to the universal" (Woolf 1992a: 134) -- but the universal in question has no rational aspect whatsoever, as it merely involves her lying "back in a trance" (ibid.). We are, in other words, far removed from the dialectic that Socrates believes

will help us “to comprehend particulars under a general idea” (Plato 1914: 559; 273d-e). Earlier in the novel, Jacob’s muddled thoughts include believing that her mere existence “seemed to discriminate between truth and falsehood” (Woolf 1992a: 127)—but this is a relatively transparent illusion.

The high point of their affair takes place on the Acropolis. Jacob’s many trips up to this ancient Greek site, during his stay in Athens, provide a counterpoint to his earlier reading of the *Phaedrus* dialogue. The previously cited passage describing his study of the dialogue evoked Plato walking the Acropolis; later, while Jacob himself is present at the same location, we are told that he “seldom thought of Plato or Socrates in the flesh” (ibid.: 131). Another link between the passage concerning Jacob’s reading in the British Museum and his visit to Greece is provided by the Elgin Marbles, which of course originated from the Parthenon temple located on the Acropolis. These statues draw “a word or two of salutation” (ibid.: 93) from a Miss Marchmont while Jacob works away at the British Museum. More profoundly, at the level of symbolism, the two episodes have important connections—as both portray struggles of light against darkness, and the transcendence of height versus the lowly. The visit to the Acropolis provides a much clearer emblem of *failed* transcendence than Jacob’s reading of the *Phaedrus* does. As in Socrates’ recantation in Plato’s dialogue, the movement of transcendence up to “the place where dwells the race of the gods” (Plato 1914: 473; 246d) is threatened by more earthly impulses. A comic version of this occurs when Jacob’s meditations are rudely interrupted by a Kodak-clicking Frenchwoman. Woolf’s protagonist is not amused: “‘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). Later, though, another woman—Mrs. Williams—gets Jacob to climb the fence after dark, and engage in a no less worldly tryst upon the Acropolis.

Despite the bathos of these episodes, the Parthenon and the other temples of the Acropolis instigate some of the most lyrical flights of *Jacob’s Room*. Particularly evocative is a meditation that follows Jacob looking, early in the morning, upwards towards the temples:

There they are again, the pillars, the pediment, the Temple of Victory and the Erechtheum, set on a tawny rock cleft with shadows, directly you unlatch your

shutters in the morning and, leaning out, hear the clatter, the clamour, the whip cracking in the street below. There they are.

The extreme definiteness with which they stand, now a brilliant white, again yellow, and in some lights red, imposes ideas of durability, of the emergence through the earth of some spiritual energy elsewhere dissipated in elegant trifles. But this durability exists quite independently of our admiration. Although the beauty is sufficiently humane to weaken us, to stir the deep deposit of mud—memories, abandonments, regrets, sentimental devotions—the Parthenon is separate from all that; and if you consider how it has stood out all night, for centuries, you begin to connect the blaze (at mid-day the glare is dazzling and the frieze almost invisible) with the idea that perhaps it is beauty alone that is immortal. (ibid.: 130)

This passage goes on to conclude that “the Parthenon appears [...] likely to outlast the entire world” (ibid.). These speculations echo Woolf’s diary notes from her 1906 visit to Greece. There a statue of a young man at the Acropolis museum provokes Woolf to meditate on “a look not seen on living faces, or but rarely, as of serene immutability, here is a type that is enduring as the earth, nay will outlast all tangible things, for such beauty is of an essence that is immortal” (Woolf 1990: 322). Recent critics have been eager to dismiss such early raptures from Woolf’s later, more mature response to Greek culture, subsuming them in a supposedly all-pervasive relativism. If we return to the passage describing the Acropolis, it is obvious that its raptures are not without an element of qualification, as it is stated that Parthenon only “appears” to last forever and that beauty is “perhaps” immortal. Coming after the Victorians, Woolf was attuned to archaeological and anthropological arguments that insisted upon the historical distance separating the Greeks from her own time. Yet her text also remarks that the durability of the Parthenon “exists quite independently of our admiration.”

Fiction as complex as Woolf’s seldom presents straightforward assertions, however, and it is possible to argue that this statement of unflinching endurance is filtered—via free indirect discourse—through the mediating consciousness of Jacob Flanders. Such an explanation runs up, though, against other, bothersome contextual evidence, in the form of Woolf’s own pronounced admiration for the Greeks. In “On Not Knowing Greek,” there is no ironic frame or filtering perspective in sight when she comes with the claim singled out by Terry Eagleton as a challenge to relativistic Woolf scholars: “In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original being is to be found there” (Woolf 1992b:

96). Difficulty and historical distance is in evidence, but this does not rule out the presence of ideality. At one stage even Jacob is influenced enough by the late- and post-Victorian tenor of thought that owned up to the distance between the Greeks and their own time to proclaim that “it is the governesses who start the Greek myth. [...] The point is, however, that we have been brought up in an illusion” (Woolf 1992a, 120). Yet Woolf’s novel refuses to grant that illusion is all we have, attracted as it is to the idea of the Greeks providing a permanent identity that is the original of the West. Thus the Acropolis provides a vision of the upper echelons of being in *Jacob’s Room*, analogous to those presented by Socrates in the mythical part of his recantation. On the other hand, Jacob’s own errant desires are similar to “the horse of evil nature [that] weighs the chariot down” in Socrates’ vision, “making it heavy and pulling towards the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained” (Plato 1914: 475; 247b).

The Acropolis and the British Museum are just two of the many sites given central importance in *Jacob’s Room*. Both place and space play an extremely important role in Woolf’s novel, as indeed is indicated by its title. Since consciousness itself is understood as a peculiarly elusive phenomenon, the spatially situated and mediated evidence of human agency becomes all the more important. The objects of Jacob’s life—his books, clothes, and rooms, for instance—provide important but ultimately inconclusive markers for an otherwise unavailable innerness. Space also constitutes an inescapable *milieu* for thought and identity, as the misfiring process of *Bildung* undergone by the protagonist is inescapably shaped by the intellectual and geographical contours of the places he inhabits along the way. Here, too, there is a connection to the *Phaedrus* dialogue, the “topographic ploy” of which Ferrari has remarked (Ferrari 1987: 37). Ferrari claims that the drawing of attention to the site of *Phaedrus* and Socrates’ encounter, at the very beginning of Plato’s text, is a pointer towards the text’s exploring the basic, transcendental background to everyday thought and action. Woolf is similarly engaged in questioning the conventional pieties of the realist fiction of her day, as evidenced for instance in her programmatic essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.” *Jacob’s Room* makes sure that we do not mistake the “phantom cities” of fiction for the “tangible brick and mortar” of given reality (Woolf 1977: 189), using space and place to tease us into thought rather than blindly reproduce the given sites we

already know. Thus, for instance, the Scarborough evoked in *Jacob's Room* is pretty much a pure invention, its overhanging hill featuring an old Roman fort providing a structural counterpart to the majestic hill dominating Athens' cityscape.

One needs, however, to think of space in a more abstract sense if we are to really fathom the common ground between these two texts on this matter. As we have seen earlier, Woolf's narrator describes the *Phaedrus* as "very difficult." Sue Roe does not fully plumb the depths of this comment, as she puts it down to what she calls the "gist" of Plato's text, referring to the *Phaedrus* as "Plato's dialogue (between Socrates and Phaedrus) on love" (Roe 1992b: 178, n. 29). If this were all Woolf wanted to evoke, she could indeed have mentioned *The Symposium* instead. Without wishing to underestimate the complexity of Plato's treatment of love, much of the difficulty of the *Phaedrus* arguably stems from the fact that it is *not* simply about love. Furthermore, it should be taken into account that the general critical consensus is that *Jacob's Room*, too, is a very difficult text. Although different in many ways, one of the major sources of the difficulties involved with these two texts may be a shared one. In both *Phaedrus* and *Jacob's Room*, the structural articulation of the text provides interpretive difficulty. Commentators have long been puzzled by the way in which the *Phaedrus* splices together different speeches, and they have been unsure whether the dialogue's main concern is the theme of love (explored in its first half) or the theme of rhetoric (raised in its second part). Woolf's book also presents itself as a collection of seemingly heterogeneous elements of text. It is full of ellipses, divided as it is into many small textual units separated from one another by empty spaces. The onus is on the reader to unite these seemingly disparate pieces of writing into one work, rendering whole (or at least somewhat cohesive) what would otherwise remain broken fragments. Woolf provides, then, a compositional challenge to the reader—one which is not all that far removed from the philosophical challenge that she saw coming out of Plato's texts: "in these dialogues," she claimed, "we are made to seek truth with every part of us." Plato's "dramatic genius [...] plays upon us in so many ways at once and brings us to an exultation of mind which can only be reached when all the powers are called upon to contribute their energy to the whole" (Woolf 1992b: 102).

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that we need to think in terms of a multi-faceted manifold of connections if we are to grasp what significance Plato generally and the *Phaedrus* dialogue specifically have for the interpretation of *Jacob's Room*. If Hayden Ausland is correct in claiming that philosophy, in the *Phaedrus*, arises out of a form of literature understood as a rhetorical art (see Ausland 2008), then *Jacob's Room* shows philosophy making a return journey back into literature. That journey should not, however, be understood as a simple process of appropriation or cooptation. As has been shown in this paper, Woolf's novel makes thematic use of Plato's treatments of love, rhetoric, writing, and place, and also arguably alludes back to the complex form of the *Phaedrus* dialogue as a predecessor for its own structural complexity. In 1906, as a tourist despairing over the discrepancies between classical and modern Greece, the young Virginia Woolf wrote that the "the sanest plan is to separate the quick from the dead, the old from the new, so that the two images shall not vex each other" (Woolf 1990: 340). Thankfully, her own later fiction would ignore this precept, mixing the old and new—and the literary and the philosophical—in a way that invigorates more than it vexes.

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