Amongst all the relations into which modernity enters, its relation to antiquity is critical.

(W. Benjamin)¹

Modernity defines itself along the terms it sets up for antiquity. But, as was argued in Chapter 1, the relation between the two is not as unequivocal as it may at first seem. Instead, it is characterized by contradictions and an ambivalence which reflects the complex nature of modernity’s understanding of itself. On the one hand, definitions of modernity attribute to antiquity the permanence and stability that the former lacks and, on the other, antiquity is construed as congenial to modernity by sharing precisely what putatively sets them apart, namely transience. It seems that the ultimate and innermost affinity between modernity and antiquity reveals itself in their liability to historicity, to the effect of time passing which will make modernity ancient some day. This ambiguity is reflected in Woolf’s ambivalent relationship to classical Greek as the paradigm of antiquity. She views Greek as both a symbol of timeless permanence and of something past and passé, of ‘no help to us’ with the problems of civilization today.² It is on this latter negation that modernism’s claim to originality is predicated. While being aware of its own historical specificity, modernist art is also motivated by the desire to become classical one day, to stamp its impression on history precisely by defining itself against past traditions. Like modernity, modernism too is thus both anticlassical and classical.³

This duplicity of attitude becomes most apparent in the modern(ist) gesture of idealizing antiquity while breaking away from it. Modernity’s predication on novelty, translated as ‘natural’ progress, forces it into a rejection of the old. At the same time, however, modernity’s reiterative
demand for the new is also the cause of its sense of ephemerality that cancels any claim to eternity or indeed to progress vis-à-vis the ancient. It too will decay, its monuments will fall into ruin. Besides, modernity’s constant assertion of the ever-new cannot prevent its collapse into the ever-same. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Benjamin had insightfully observed that progress and eternal repetition (of the new) are really identical, since a notion of progress based on a concept of the ever-new, in fact implies a repetition of ‘the new’ as that which is ‘always the same’.4

Inversely, the modern search for novelty and its constant emptying of the experience of the present as ephemeral generates an idealization of the past. It makes a myth of antiquity; it turns it into a measure and source of status, a locus of nostalgia for lost order and permanence, and even an occasion for escape from the present and the constant engendering of new (and potentially revolutionary) forms. This attitude finds its different articulations on the one hand in technological and urban modernity’s phantasmagoria of the new that dressed itself in classical forms and, on the other, in (Anglo-American) literary modernism’s notable nostalgia, shared with much of the nineteenth-century interest in archaeology and other trends in ‘reviving’ the classical past.

On a personal level, in spite (or perhaps precisely because) of her deprivation, due to her sex, of formal teaching in Greek, Virginia Woolf held a strong admiration for classical Greece, also fostered by such influential nineteenth-century critics as Walter Pater as well as by Woolf’s own father. Woolf’s love of Greek letters and the pride and delight she took in learning the language become manifest in her many references to Greek, scattered across her novels, essays, reviews diaries, letters and her ‘Greek Notebook’, which contains her notes on reading the classics. The keenness of the interest she took in the culture further shows in her twice visiting Greece and in her mainly enthusiastic responses to it.5 Finally, Greek becomes something of an idiolect in one of the symptoms of her illness, when she heard the birds singing in Greek.6

Greek is a tradition that has institutionally been identified in the West as the source of truth and universal human knowledge, the origin and paradigm of Western thought and civilization. Consequently, ‘knowing’ Greek has been established metonymically as the possession of knowledge and truth itself. This is precisely why access to Greek was historically limited to a male élite destined to be not only scholars and poets but also, and more significantly, politicians, administrators and businessmen in the service of imperial power.7 In view of the celebrated as well as exclusive status of Greek in Woolf’s time, her relation to it was predictably