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# The Search for God: Virginia Woolf and Caroline Emelia Stephen

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## The Search for God: Virginia Woolf and Caroline Emelia Stephen

As a Modernist follower of radical individualism, Virginia Woolf is thought to be antipathetic to religious thought; Woolf's own spirituality, however, is certainly more complicated than most critics have allowed, especially in light of the influence of her aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen, a well-known Quaker mystic and writer who rejected the established church in favor of a less traditional version of Christianity. The intellectual relationship between niece and aunt has been little discussed; aside from Jane Marcus's "The Niece of a Nun: Caroline Stephen and the Cloistered Imagination" and Alison Lewis's "A Quaker Influence on Modern English Literature: Caroline Stephen and her Niece, Virginia Woolf," few critics seem to have considered the implications of Stephen's influence on Woolf's works and ideas.

Any association with Christianity may seem to be negated by Woolf's liberal sexuality, the atheism and agnosticism of her characters, and her association with the heterodox Bloomsbury Group, with its emphasis on materialism. Their sexual transgressiveness and relativist ideals seemingly place them outside religion, but "religion" here means the established church, little more than conventional morality. Certainly Modernism and Christianity appear to conflict in a consideration of absolute truth: where Christians generally believe there is only one road to truth, Modernists suggest there are many roads; they recognize in some of what has traditionally been considered "absolute truth" a truth of privilege. While some might consider such a paradigm shift to be relativistic, in that truth may shift depending on identity, Woolf's aunt believed an honest effort to find truth is inclusive, not exclusive, of a search for God (*Quaker Strongholds* [QS] 132). Comprehending Woolf's spirituality requires a more nuanced understanding of Christianity, one that looks beyond church attendance to a genuine, deep struggle for an articulation of God.

Caroline Emelia Stephen (1834-1909), the unmarried sister of Woolf's father, was very close to Leslie Stephen's family, as Quentin Bell and Hermione Lee note. *Quaker Strongholds* (1890) remains her best-known book, although she also published articles on women's suffrage, fashion, and charity. Stephen's struggle with her faith was largely a reaction against her patrilineage, leading to her Quaker conversion, and is strikingly similar to the religious dithering of which Woolf stands accused (QS 33-34). Stephen was attracted to the elements of Quakerism that allowed for tolerance, if not celebration, of those differences in people. Lest we think she was one of the liberal New Women, though, her history provides us with some complex paradoxes: she was firmly ensconced in her position as a member of the upper class and felt there were particular duties required of her class ("Mistress and Servant" 1051); she was fiercely anti-Roman Catholic (QS 137-138); she opposed women's suffrage and women's colleges (though she changed her mind about the education of women later in life) (see "The Representation of Women"). Still, in her way, she did much toward suggesting that understanding rather than condemnation is paramount to furthering God's kingdom, and at the time she wrote, such tolerance was considered to be relativistic, undermining the truth of God in its unorthodoxy.

Caroline Emelia Stephen's influence on Virginia Woolf is significant. Not only did she bequeath the bulk of her estate to Woolf (thus allowing Woolf a room of her own), but when Woolf's father died in 1904, Stephen took her in and tended her after the first of several mental breakdowns. Woolf stayed with her for some months, recovering her health; they sometimes talked through the night (Bell 63; 90). Woolf read *Quaker Strongholds*, and at least owned a copy of another of Stephen's books, *Light Arising*; both books are in the Woolf library collection at the University of Washington at Pullman. The notes she made in them confirm she had read passages which align with her own

works, establishing connections that illuminate Woolf's efforts to seek for greater meaning in life, even for the God she sometimes appears to deny. She may have read *Quaker Strongholds* together with her father. Leslie certainly derogated the book as that "little book" (*Mausoleum* 56) his sister wrote, ignoring its reputation as the single most important literary influence in the renaissance of Quakerism at the end of the nineteenth century. In Leslie's copy of the book, there are some relatively disparaging comments next to Stephen's text, and a number of pages remain uncut, suggesting he never got around to finishing the book. In Woolf's copy, the notes end approximately halfway through the book as well. Of course this is speculation on small evidence, but the textual evidence and an understanding of the tremendous influence that Leslie wielded upon Woolf seem to support the likelihood that Leslie and Virginia read Caroline's books together.

Thematic connections between the two women abound. For both, truth-telling is crucially important: it is behind the innovation of literary topics, styles and forms for which Woolf is known, and is the motivation for Stephen's conversion. In rejecting the traditional patriarchal authority over a polyglot world (one too often inaccurately represented as merely the voice of the individual), Woolf continues the same rejection of *form* rather than substance which Stephen herself chose. Textual evidence and the notations in Woolf's copy of Stephen's books suggest that a number of Stephen's other themes interest Woolf as well, including her aunt's awakening to God through the Quaker tradition, her theology, her struggle to reconcile her position as a thinking woman to the position accorded her in Victorian society, and her engagement with silence as a means of hearing God's message. Stephen's treatment of God as light or as voice is especially telling when compared to Woolf's similar treatments in her work. Stephen's portrayal of God's truth as an intermittent light, showing the way (*The Vision of Faith* 49), is echoed in Woolf's own use of the lighthouse as authority figure in *To the Lighthouse*; it is a figure to which the family, especially the men, are problematically drawn.

Likewise, when Woolf states, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (96), she argues that character has become more important than plot or externals, and that truth can only be discovered through individuals and their "relative" position in the world. Woolf's novels, especially *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, delve into characters, into their motivations, their obsessions, their search for connectedness. Stephen considers such truth seeking as part of the mystical impulse:

Mystics, as I understand the matter, are those whose minds, to their own consciousness, are lighted from within; who feel themselves to be in immediate communication with the central Fountain of light and life. They have naturally a vivid sense both of the distinction and of the harmony between the inward and the outward — a sense so vivid that it is impossible for them to believe it to be unshared by others. A true mystic believes that all men have, as he himself is conscious of having, an inward life, into which, as into a secret chamber, he can retreat at will. (QS 14-15)

Clarissa Dalloway, in her effort to find the harmony between the inward and the outward, becomes a true mystic, seeking connection with other characters. While some scholars argue that Clarissa, in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Voyage Out*, is meant to at least partially speak for Woolf (see Bonnie Kime Scott's Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*), there is more evidence to support an autobiographical reading of Woolf in other characters than in Clarissa Dalloway. Rachel, in *The Voyage Out*, for example, has far more in common with Woolf, in her haphazard education, her relationship with her father and other academics, her efforts to connect with a mother figure in the absence of her own mother. Rachel, amazed to find a society of people who do not freely own to being Christian, has her own "conversion" moment when she sees a church service as painfully irrelevant, not because there is no God but

because people have failed to feel God: she is “enraged by the clumsy insensitiveness of the conductor” of the service, and “the atmosphere of enforced solemnity increased her anger” (228).

All round her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel, while somewhere above her floated the idea which they could none of them grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea, an idea like a butterfly. One after another, vast and hard and cold, appeared to her the churches all over the world where this blundering effort and misunderstanding were perpetually going on, great buildings, filled with innumerable men and women, not seeing clearly, who finally gave up the effort to see, and relapsed tamely into praise and acquiescence, half-shutting their eyes and pursing up their lips [ . . . ]. With the violence that now marked her feelings, she rejected all that she had before implicitly believed. (228-29)

Rachel does not reject God so much as she does empty and false religious practice. Her position is very like that of Caroline Emelia Stephen, whose shift away from her evangelical Clapham upbringing and towards the Quaker tradition is strongly evoked here. Stephen recalls going to Anglican services, and finding herself alienated from the language itself:

The more vividly one feels the force of its eloquence, the more, it seems to me, one must hesitate to adopt it as the language of one’s own soul, and the more unlikely is it that such heights and depths of feeling as it demands should be ready to fill its magnificent channels every Sunday morning at a given hour. (QS 11)

Woolf’s search for the individual, for the private, for the character who is truly and fully human, as made by God and not by culture’s assumptions about class, gender, or society (see, especially, Woolf’s exploration of gender identity in *Orlando*), also finds its heritage in Stephen’s inclusive idea of Quakerism:

The perennial justification of Quakerism lies in its energetic assertion that the kingdom of heaven is within us; that we are not made dependent upon any outward organization for our spiritual welfare. Its perennial difficulty lies in the inveterate disposition of human beings to look to each other for spiritual help, in the feebleness of their perception of the Divine Voice which speaks to each one in a language no other can hear, and in the apathy which is content to go through life without the attempt at any true individual communion with God. (QS 8)

While this exploration of the connections remains cursory, assuredly, the family alignments and influences, the biographical details, the works of both women, and the historical moment combine to create a compelling argument that Woolf’s spirituality was deeply influenced by her Quaker aunt. The urge to align truth and mysticism, to find such truth without the paradigm of authority under which they were both educated, was powerful for both women, and the similarities in their ideas are too striking to ignore.

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