

Walter Pater, the Stephens and Virginia Woolf's Mysticism

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Abstract

This essay looks at Virginia Woolf as a mystical writer who represents her inner truth by way of idiosyncratic expressions in literature. Based on Meisel's discovery, described in *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater*, of her father Leslie Stephen's and Walter Pater's influences on Woolf, I further extend Meisel's argument by showing how Stephen's and Pater's Platonic morality and aesthetics promoted Woolf's acceptance of her Quaker aunt Caroline Stephen's religious vision, and how these three influences joined together to give Woolf's writings a distinctively mystical dimension.

Keywords

identification, difference, multiplicity, oneness, inner light, writing as ritual, mysticism

I. Ecstasy: Virginia Woolf as a Mystical Writer

In "A Sketch of the Past," one of Virginia Woolf's autobiographical memoirs written when she was near sixty, Woolf described a state of inebriation recalled from her past:

It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. [...] When I think of the early morning in bed I also hear the caw of rooks falling from a great height. The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend

sound, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil. The rocks caving is part of the waves breaking—one, two, one, two—and the splash as the wave drew back and then it gathered again, and I lay there half awake, half asleep, drawing in such ecstasy as I cannot describe. (*Moments of Being* 65)

Not only do all these sensual images interweave into a larger “state of mind,” but the distinction between subject and object is blurred as well. Time loses its meaning. The past and the present merge together. The recreated universe then is an insubstantial oneness, its myriads of atoms disseminating like nebula but all connected together to form a unified whole. As for the speaker’s sense of euphoria, it is in fact a mystic’s ideal state of mind. In *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill calls it the “apex” or the “spark of the soul” (366), which marks the last stage of contemplation. As she says in her introduction to this state of ecstasy:

All mystics agree in regarding such ecstasy as an exceptionally favourable state; the one in which man’s spirit is caught up to the most immediate union with the divine. The word has become a synonym for joyous exaltation, for the inebriation of the Infinite. (358)

In fact, the whole Christian doctrine of ecstasy descends from the great practical transcendentalist Plotinus, who is known to have been an ecstatic. Plotinus has given us in his *The Enneads* a description of the mystical trance obviously based upon his own experiences (Underhill 372). *Ἐκστάσις* (ecstasy, standing out), from *ἐκ* (out of) and *στάσις* (stand), is the Greek term used by Plotinus for the state of entrancement, a loss of self-consciousness caused by one’s entire union with the One, the primary “hypostasis” or fundamental “ground” (“hypostasis” is “standing under”) of the universe. According to Plotinus, this state is achieved through contemplation (6.7.35). In the early stage of contemplation, the Soul gets purified as it transcends its body and life by looking back toward itself and thus objectifying its own state of being; but in approaching the final state, the Soul may even lose the consciousness of contemplation itself and become entirely merged with the purest being. As a complete abandonment of one’s self and even one’s own perception, the divine state attained becomes indefinable, indistinguishable, ineffable to the perceiver or (now no longer) “subject.” As a result, as Plotinus describes it, “we neither hold an object nor trace

distinction; there is no two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it" (6.9.10). A passage in *The Enneads* referring to the eventual loss of demarcation between subjects and objects seems to correspond to Woolf's indescribable state of ecstasy:

In this state of absorbed contemplation there is no longer question of holding an object: the vision is continuous so that seeing and seen are one thing; object and act of vision have become identical; of all that until then filled the eye no memory remains. (6.7.35)

Although their particular representations of the ecstatic experience may be different—Woolf's description is more impressionistic—Plotinus and Woolf share the vision of an ineffable state of being in which mortal norms and forms are dissolved, the sense of new unity emerging out of dissolution. Struck by the resonance between these experiences of reunion with the whole, I am encouraged to study Woolf as a mystical writer, one who like Plotinus endeavors to find from within a new order of/in the universe. Plotinus is recognized in the West as the founder of speculative mysticism, expressing in intellectual or rather supra-intellectual categories the stages and states of union with the Absolute.¹ Claiming Woolf as a mystical writer devoted to *evoking*, not just describing, the spiritual state of ecstasy, I will then be assuming the validity of Plotinus's view of the soul's mystical union with the One.

The recognition of Woolf's mystical element can help us explore the core of her thought and the aesthetic background of some of her creative works, including *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*. Besides sporadic descriptions of her moments of ecstasy, themselves a variation on the epiphanies experienced by Clarissa Dalloway or Septimus Smith or indeed almost any Woolf's characters at any particular and quite random moment, there are also more "analytic" passages which discuss the author's "philosophy." But, as in this one from "A Sketch of the Past," it may be hard to distinguish the analytic mode from the "ecstatic" one:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden **a pattern**; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a

¹ See S. J. Paul Henry, "Plotinus' Place in the History of Thought," collected in Plotinus's *The Enneads*.

work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (*Moments of Being* 72; my emphasis)

According to Stace, the perception of the ultimate Unity—what Plotinus calls “the One,” in which the perceiver experiences his cosmic identification with the universe—is the supreme goal of mystical life. Given Woolf’s description of her union with the whole world, her connection to it in a single pattern, the equality of all parts of the world such that distinctions vanish, it will be argued here that what Woolf calls “a philosophy” or “a constant idea of mine” is in fact essentially mystical. Though neither “mysticism” nor “contemplation” is often literally mentioned in Woolf’s own writings, “the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important” (*Moments of Being* 69). But this “oblivion” of such ideas, feelings or insights may be closely tied to their “unspeakability”; a key doctrine of mysticism is of course that neither the Infinite nor our sense of inebriation in it is expressible in words. Thus too the lack of literal evidence for her mystical inclination cannot be weighed too heavily in our attempt to interpret and understand Woolf. To investigate the author’s spiritual life more “positively” one should rather start from its most silent part, which may lie near the core, impalpable to the senses and ineffable in language, yet the prime mover in/of Woolf’s thinking and writing.

II. Academic Controversy Regarding Woolf’s Mystical Dimension

In fact, there has long been a mystical approach to Woolf’s life and art. Let me first present a brief review of the “mystical” criticism, dividing it into three categories, or three perspectives.

In terms of thematic studies, Madeline Moore offers an analogy between Woolf and Jane Lead (1624-1704), a Protestant mystic and spiritual autobiographer. Confronted with Lead’s striking “vision of an over-shadowing bright Cloud and in the midst of it the Figure of a Woman” (27), Moore recalls the “deified sun goddess” in Woolf’s *The Waves*. Jane Marcus even attributes Woolf’s recurrent images of light and

sun directly to her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, a great Quaker theologian. From Caroline, says Marcus, Woolf finally learned “to speak the language of light”—a “little language” unknown to most men—and to train herself to trust her memory and inner voices (28).

As for more formal research, Jeanne Schulkind affirms Woolf’s mystical temperament by focusing her attention on the elusive style of her works. “Her characters are marked by the infinite variability which she admired in Mme. De Sévigné,” says Schulkind in her introduction to Woolf’s *Moments of Being*, “[t]here is a roominess about so many of Virginia Woolf’s characters, a sense of mystery and of the inexplicable; they are rarely enclosed in precise outlines” (14). Besides, if we consider the paradoxical reconciliation of one and multiplicity essential to Woolf’s technique of “stream of consciousness” as analyzed by Robert Humphrey, we may also see it in terms of the ineffable oneness all mystics strive to attain in their contemplation. As Humphrey says, “We know from Virginia Woolf’s essays that she believed the important thing for the artist to express is his private vision of reality, of what life, subjectively, is. [...] Analogically, we may call the Virginia Woolf of these two stream-of-consciousness novels a mystic. She is a mystic in that she is interested in the search her characters make for unification” (13).

Finally, regarding Woolf’s support of women’s equality with men, and even of female homosexuality, Moore and Marcus tend to draw parallels with mysticism. As Moore points out, with the mystical image of the “deified sun goddess” Woolf subverted the traditional binary hierarchy, with its privileging of man over woman by associating man with sun, light, culture and reason, woman with their opposites. And yet, Moore asserts, Woolf’s disruption of the traditional value system came not so much from any simple gender or sexual subversion (reversal of the hierarchy) as from a mystical belief in every soul’s individuality, for this belief prevented her from reducing one’s individuality to gender and/or sexual differences. On the other hand, Marcus also claims that with the aid of her aunt’s powerful spiritual (religious) influence, Woolf was enabled to “attain divinity” silently through personal contemplation. Since all fixed dogmas or external institutions can only be obstacles to one’s spiritual purification, and thus need to be overthrown, her aunt’s spiritual illumination might have convinced Woolf that only by the casting off of external values could equality and pacifism replace hierarchy and war. Hence Marcus’s note regarding the two women’s mysticism: “if pacifism is the purest political stance, mysticism is the purest religious concept” (10).

On the other hand, mystical “readings” of Woolf’s life and art still provoke debate among critics. Jane Goldman, for example, criticizes Marcus’s view that Woolf wants to make a show of her lack of a formal education, becoming a mystic just to prove that the relatively uneducated “daughters of educated men [...] can [still] be mystics” (23). In arguing on behalf of Woolf’s predominantly rational-intellectual nature, Goldman states explicitly that “while I agree that Woolf does indeed colonize the figure of the sun for feminism, and may well have made use of her aunt Caroline’s luminous imagery, I am not convinced that this amounts to quasi-Quakerism or mysticism in her writing” (24).

In her diary Woolf suggested that her sense, her awareness of her own mystical nature came to her sporadically, haunting her as if it were some strange and uncanny otherness within her:

Yet I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it. (*Diary* 118)

It seems that further research into the mystical influences on Woolf could help clarify the issues here. One of the key problems will be to uncover tendencies in the author’s own writing of which she might have remained largely unconscious.

III. Three Influences

In *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater*, Perry Meisel attempts to prove that although she shares what Quentin Bell calls “a common shop” with her puritan father, Leslie Stephen (64), Woolf’s writing style also inherits much from Walter Pater. Here Meisel’s argument can be extended: the question becomes how Stephen’s morality and Pater’s aesthetics helped to cultivate a Platonic environment, one whose preference for spirituality over materialism made natural Woolf’s acceptance of her Quaker aunt’s religious visions. The following will then explore how these three influences have joined together to make Woolf a mystical/Plotinian writer.

In fact, Woolf not only did not recognize the contribution to her own spiritual

development of any of these three mentors, she either explicitly disclaimed or unconsciously rejected the notion that they were themselves truly mystics. This might have been due at least partly to the conflict she experienced between her social responsibilities, aesthetic interests and mystical inclinations, which to a degree parallels the “contradiction” among/between the essentially Platonic philosophies of Pater, Leslie Stephen, and Caroline Stephen. Later I will suggest a reading of this contradiction in terms of different perspectives on the Neo-Platonic thinker Plotinus’s *Nous* or “Intelligence,” the first stage of emanation from the primal “One”; I will also suggest that we can read Woolf’s ultimate reconciliation or unification, in her *creative writing* (which becomes itself a form of *contemplation*), of these three mystical influences in the light of this pre-existing (or rather pre-subsisting) Plotinian One. But to see how her internal conflict between/among Platonic morality, aesthetics, and religion agitated Woolf’s own “mind,” one must first note how these influences first entered the author’s life. Let us then now briefly trace her three mentors’ influence on her idiosyncratic narrative style and themes.

A. Leslie Stephen

From her father Leslie Stephen, Woolf inherited the will to seek the truth. Born into a family of staunch Christians and expected to enter the priesthood when religious controversy and doubt were already widespread throughout the academy, Stephen inevitably chose to become an atheist, gave up his fellowship in Cambridge, and sought to establish himself in the wider world of London. But as Peter Dally points out, “a parent [i.e., Stephen’s father, Sir James] is far more difficult than God to kill and the phantom lives on long after death” (14). Though Stephen’s conversion to atheism certainly freed him to enter a broader, more satisfying world, at heart he kept feeling regret at not having accomplished the religious life that his father expected of him. This regret, we may assume, accounted for his compensatory insistence on the puritanical way of living; and it was because of the constant internal conflict between reason and religion in Stephen’s mind that he finally sought spiritual asylum from the pragmatic dimension of religion—morality and social responsibility.

In “Art and Morality,” Stephen said art “should stimulate the healthy, not the morbid emotions; and, in that sense, all art and poetry should be moral and even didactic” (101). To some extent, Stephen’s viewpoint emulates Plato’s reverence for the truth rather than for Homer. In Meisel’s view, such an evangelical notion of artistic responsibility explains why Stephen insisted on choosing books for his daughter

Virginia but not letting her use his library freely until his last years, which contributed to making Woolf a moral essayist concerned with women's rights and women's equality with men—though her patriarchal and tyrannical father's influence would eventually be expelled, even if its power had been absorbed. As Meisel says:

To the extent that she [Woolf] was eventually to envisage her work as serving a moral purpose, we can in fact ascribe it to the positive side of her father's earliest influence, with his insistence on the writer's responsibility to society clearly fueling the missionary zeal of works like *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and many of her shorter essays. (7)

Note the clear and straightforward argumentative style, as well as the stress on individualism, in this passage:

That is a fair general statement of what patriotism means to an educated man and what duties it imposes upon him. But the educated man's sister—what does "patriotism" mean to her? Has she the same reasons for being proud of England, for loving England, for defending England? Has she been "greatly blessed" in England? History and biography when questioned would seem to show that her position in the home of freedom has been different from her brother's; and psychology would seem to hint that history is not without its effect upon mind and body. Therefore her interpretation of the word "patriotism" may well differ from his. And that difference may make it extremely difficult for her to understand his definition of patriotism and the duties it imposes. (*Three Guineas* 9)

Indeed at the age of sixty, Woolf openly admitted in "A Sketch of the Past" her "puritan" inheritance from her father: "I am almost inclined to think that I inherited a streak of the puritan, of the Clapham Sect" (*Moments of Being* 68). And besides the "streak of the puritan," Meisel finds in Woolf's early writings a style "so elevated yet so unimpeded by ornament" (6) that it is apparently Stephen's legacy. Though Woolf once subverted the genre of biography by creating her surrealistic novels *Orlando* and *Flush* in reaction to her father's arguably male-centric compilation of the *DNB*,² her

² Leslie Stephen once devoted himself to the compiling of *Dictionary of National Biography*. Though he had allowed both his sister and his wife to write one entry for it (with Julia Stephen's entry on her

biographical portrait of Roger Fry still followed Stephen's prescribed style for conventional biography:

He [Roger Fry] was born on 14th December 1866, the second son of Edward Fry and of Mariabella, the daughter of Thomas Hodgkin. Both were Quakers. Behind Roger on his father's side were eight recorded generations of Frys, beginning with [...] Zephaniah, the first to become a Quaker, [...] and from that time onwards the Frys held the Quaker faith and observed certain marked peculiarities both of opinion and of dress, for which, in the early days, they endured considerable persecution [...]. (*Roger Fry* 11)

But on the other hand, those who privilege reason over all other values may tend to be rigid, cold, sneering, tyrannical. Thus, in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf recalled her father as follows:

The fact remains that at the age of sixty-five he was a man in prison, isolated. He had so ignored or disguised his own feelings that he had no idea of what he was; and no idea of what other people were. Hence the horror and the terror of those violent displays of rage. There was something blind, animal, savage in them. (*Moments of Being* 146)

Besides, as Dally points out, Stephen's character, as we see in his love of mountain climbing, was rather egoistic and even pugnacious: "It was the conquest of the mountain rather than a search for tranquility, a need to prove to himself, as much as to the world [...] that really motivated him" (12). And since as Woolf said, "nothing is so much to be dreaded as egotism" (*Moments of Being* 147), all those self-centered qualities of her father finally made Stephen inaccessible to his daughter. The slightly tyrannical Mr. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse*, in fact, is created by Woolf out of the image of Stephen:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all of his own

aunt, Julia Cameron, the highly regarded photographer, and Caroline Stephen's on Mary Aikenhead, the founder of the Irish Sisters of Charity), Woolf still complained that no "lives of maids" were written.

children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising. (8)

Woolf's attitude toward her father was thus ambivalent. On the one hand, she admired her father because she desired knowledge and wanted to become a writer like him; on the other hand, however, she abhorred his bullying, brutal masculinity and rigid Puritanism. "He had," said Woolf, "no feeling for pictures; no ear for music; no sense of the sound of words [...]. This leads me to think that my natural love for beauty was checked by some ancestral dread" (*Moments of Being* 68); and therefore, recalling him in her diary, Woolf confessed that if he lived on to be 100 she could never become a writer (*Diary* 208). But on the other hand, when discussing their parents with her sister, Woolf surprised Vanessa by choosing their rather remote father while Vanessa unhesitatingly chose their mother. After Stephen's death, Woolf even expressed her secret feelings of regret and sorrow in a letter to her Quaker friend Violet Dickinson: "You can't think what a relief it is to have someone—that is you, because there isn't anyone else to talk to" (*Letters* 136).

In fact, Woolf's complicated attitude toward her father may be said to parallel her ambivalent attitude toward Plato's idealism. Confronting the phenomena of the world of becoming, Plato chooses to see reality in the constant idea behind appearances. Since it is from the absolute ground of Being that the change and multiplicity of the world are generated, the distinctions among all species are merely illusory from the perspective of the one Being. To grasp those myriads of atoms of the material world as one, therefore, it is necessary to capture the one metaphysical cause or ground lying behind appearances. This systemization of its multiplicity into one unity helps one acquire knowledge of the world. Since Woolf had cultivated a desire for knowledge and truth by studying with Stephen, such Platonic logic no doubt dominated her way of thinking. And this finally formed her philosophy, dissolving not only the distinctions between Beethoven and Shakespeare but also those between male and female. Therefore in *Orlando*, through the imaginative figure of Orlando him/herself, Woolf created her ideal character, one stripped of a determinate gender:

The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity [...]. His memory—but in future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his," and "she" for "he"—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without

encountering any obstacle. (138)

This androgyny can be seen as another manifestation of the Platonic (and Plotinian) “philosophy of identification,” along with Woolf’s belief in sexual equality and pacifism. Yet in her idealistic search for the constant idea behind appearances Woolf also saw, and regretted, that each distinctive and determinate quality (e.g., gender) may be lost. For Quentin Bell, her concern “with the pleasures of the senses and above all with the pleasures of the visible world” represents Woolf’s “Un-Stephen attitude” (*Bloomsbury* 40). In “How It Strikes a Contemporary,” Woolf mapped out her “philosophy of difference” as follows:

We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale—the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages—has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present [...]. No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. (157-58)

Woolf’s ambivalence toward Stephen’s puritanical and totalizing Platonism, her cherishing of each single moment, each distinct image, each aroused sensation finally made her turn to Pater’s art of expressiveness as set forth in the “Preface” to *The Renaissance*—“to know one’s impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (viii). Pondering Woolf’s acceptance of Pater’s aesthetics, Meisel suggests that the impetus came from Leslie Stephen’s mortal aversion to Pater and Woolf’s covert rebellion against her father’s authoritarianism. But it seems there must also be some essential affinity between Stephen and Pater if Woolf could accept them both. Perhaps the paradoxical reconciliation of truth and beauty within Plato’s idealism would be one way of interpreting Woolf’s own “two sides.”

B. Walter Pater

In contrast with Stephen’s focus on morality and social responsibility, Pater’s interpretation of Plato’s idealism emphasizes personal, inward interaction with the absolute idea. “All knowledge,” says Pater in *Plato and Platonism*, is to be understood on the basis of “knowing a person” (129): the aesthetic model here is not the

puritanical rejection of art in the *Republic* but the apotheosis of beauty in the *Symposium*, where we move upward from the perception of physical beauty to the absolute idea of beauty, closely tied to that of the soul itself, self-identity. The discovery of one's self by confronting his "direct sensation" is thus the pathway to absolute truth; it is only through the "immediate vision" that Greek genius can truly express itself, as Pater says in the same book. And, since one's "single sharp impression" can only be awakened by his personal interaction with myriads of atoms of the visible world, each distinct quality of every particle of the world is thus as precious as each distinct sensation that is aroused; paradoxically we seem to have finally returned to the same radical empiricism with which we started out. Compared with Stephen's ascetic rejection of feeling and sensibility, Pater's celebration of the visible world, of the true feeling aroused by that world in a sort of inward contemplation, would appear to be more congenial to Woolf's aesthetic temperament.

Woolf first read Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* in Stephen's library. As Meisel points out, because each portrait of a person begins in the form of a diary—one of Woolf's favorite forms—this book attracted Woolf when she first read it. With his careful attention to the movement of his characters' thoughts, Pater indeed anticipates the lavish care Woolf as author would also take in tracing the mood and tone of her characters' ideas and sensations. It was thus only through her private reading of Pater's book that she became finally liberated from the limitations of a moral view of literature. In fact, as Meisel says, it was precisely Pater's refreshing call for "perception, vision, and fineness" that Woolf responded to in her own writing (13-15).

In exploring Woolf's post-impressionistic aesthetics, Goldman traces the analogy between her writing style and Vanessa's painting. Now it is clear that such an impressionistic style, which insists on a profound physical touch and great expressiveness in art, came from Pater's influence. In the following passages depicting Woolf's impression of the past in memory—with their emphasis on the colors of her mother's dress and her dreamy sense of being transported into a state of indistinctness—one can detect something of Pater's own "expressive" style:

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground—my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose. (*Moments of Being* 64)

If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf—sounds indistinguishable from sights. (*Moments of Being* 66)

In short, what Pater and Woolf pursued in art was the most purified touch, “casting off all débris, and leaving us only what the heat of their imagination has wholly fused and transformed” (*The Renaissance* x-xi). For them the figures of “fusion” and “transformation” were highly Platonic, symbolizing the sublimation of the material into the spiritual. Meisel points out that since Pater’s favorite tropes, “diamond” and “crystal,” present the quality of luminous whiteness and refinement of “Platonic aesthetics,” Woolf’s similar preference for figures like “light” and “flame” bespeaks her Paterian as well as Platonic aesthetics (53-103). Therefore, thanks to Pater’s inward interpretation of Plato’s contemplation, Woolf’s indulgence in personal interaction with the visible world found its justification and encouragement.

But on the other hand, just as Stephen’s insistence on truth and morality could not satisfy Woolf’s passionate love for the distinctive qualities and senses of the world, Pater’s inward contemplation and his abandonment of sensibility turned out to be too individualistic, too lacking in social concern for her. Living in an era when new values were replacing the old and obsolete ones, Woolf could only keep her literary admiration for Pater buried deep in her mind. After her tutor Janet Case gave her “burgeoning aestheticism” a certain moral and political “correction,” Woolf explicitly condemned Pater’s prejudice and willful brutality toward women in *The Pargiters* (Meisel 21-22).

Thus on the one hand it was, to a significant degree at least, her persistent Platonic search for order that made Woolf accept both Stephen’s morality outwardly and Pater’s aesthetics inwardly; but on the other hand, since neither Stephen’s world-order nor Pater’s order of beauty could by itself satisfy Woolf’s spirit, the writer could only resolve the contradiction by resigning herself to the moral sense and beauty

apprehended in her mind, seeking asylum from any larger, more “real” entity or being. Due then to Woolf’s need to sublimate worldly morality and beauty in a manner parallel to that of Platonic metaphysical contemplation, her aunt’s religious vision of the world finally attracted her attention.

C. Caroline Emelia Stephen

According to Quentin Bell’s portrait of Woolf’s aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, she was “an intelligent woman who fell, nevertheless, into the role of the imbecile Victorian female” and who “at the age of twenty-three settled down to become an invalid and an old maid” (*Virginia Woolf* 7). Caroline’s poor health, according to Leslie Stephen as he recalled his sister in *The Mausoleum Book*, was caused by her unrequited love for a man who deserted her for India and died shortly thereafter. However, as Alison M. Lewis points out, Leslie’s imputation of Caroline’s broken health to her “mythical lover” may only be a way to exempt himself of any guilt, for Caroline had to take care of him and his family for many years. Besides, what was “even more damaging was the fact that he [Leslie] made every effort to denigrate Caroline’s writing. Her work is ‘little,’ he said, perhaps in contrast to his own ‘big’ work” (Lewis). It was thus perhaps from her father’s view of her aunt that Woolf formed a somewhat comical image of Caroline and called her “Silly Milly” or “Nun” or “The quaking Quaker” when she was young.

However, an important encounter between the two women finally changed Woolf’s early adulthood. After her mental collapse caused by Stephen’s death in 1904, a convalescent Woolf boarding with her aunt at her Cambridge home, known as “The Porch,” finally came to know Caroline Stephen and came into contact with religion at some Quaker meetings. A protestant sect of Christianity, Quakerism arose as a reaction to institutional sacraments and an ordained ministry. Emancipated from external religious forms, the Society of Friends asserted there is an “inner light” in each individual soul. The “Quakers” took their name from their special emphasis on the mystical virtue or power of “touching divinity” (touching God or rather being touched by Him), a “touch” which could make someone physically “quake.” As for their reliance on and use of language, the Quakers were liberated from external forms and words; they did not explicate biblical texts or logically explain doctrine during their meetings. Rather, “the speaker poured forth an abundance of archetypal images in plain language to a point where ‘metaphor has transcended its normal function, and instead of merely indicating a point of resemblances between two differentiable

entities, it has totally merged them” (Marcus 29). And, since it was personal experience rather than abstract reason that was stressed by all Quakers, silence prevailed and dissolved the power of words during their meetings. In the following passage we see how Caroline learned to liberate herself in that prevailing silence which tolerated all differences:

What I felt I wanted in a place of worship was a refuge, or at least the opening of a doorway towards the refuge, from doubts and controversies; not a fresh encounter with them. Yet it seems to me impossible that any one harassed by the conflicting views of truth, with which just now the air is thick, should be able to forget controversy while listening to such language as that of the Book of Common Prayer. It seems to me that nothing but silence can heal the wounds made by disputations in the region of the unseen. (*Quaker Strongholds* 44)

It can be easily inferred that during these meetings, while Caroline was finding freedom from intellectual and theological controversies in silence, Virginia was also discovering a new type of freedom. While “in her life at the Stephen household, ‘silence was a breach of convention’ and mindless small talk a requirement,” “the focused quiet of Quaker meeting must have given Virginia a needed opportunity to rest, turn inward, and recollect herself from her trauma” (Lewis). It was thus during this period of recuperation that she learned from her aunt to listen to inner voices and to talk with spirits. This was a necessary step on her way to becoming a writer and exploring her writing talents more seriously. It was also during this time that Woolf published an article for the first time in *The Guardian*, a church-related weekly.

The new experiences now entering Woolf’s life may help us to understand the anecdotes about this writer’s delusions—for example, hearing birds singing to her in Greek (*Letters* 142). Very likely Caroline’s religious enlightenment contributed to such manic or mystical fantasies—though Dally tends to interpret them in terms of her mental diseases (51-52). For example, in recording what impelled her to write *The Waves*, Woolf once expressed her desire to grasp, to see how spirits and inner voices actually came into her writing soul: “I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solicitude [...]. I want to watch and see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own process” (*A Writer’s Diary* 100). This focus on our individual realization of divinity suggests what Caroline urged in *Light Arising*: “to think for

ourselves; to construct out of our own actual experience some sort of creed” (136-37). Thus, while indulging in memories of her dead brother Thoby, Woolf effaced her self and ushered in the voices of the spirits, now conversing in her mind: *The Waves* is a chorus of six voices polyphonically grappling with the death of their beloved friend Percival. And, to capture the elusive reality striking her mind or what she calls that “curious state of mind” she experienced in writing (*A Writer’s Diary* 100), Woolf even disintegrated her characters (in fact her muses or spirits, who promoted her creative process) into multiple particles of the world:

I [Louis] hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. (*The Waves* 11-12)

But with Woolf’s/Louis’s disintegration, a new sense of integration emerges. The world becomes a whole, with every particle within it interconnected. What Woolf’s self-effacement or Louis’s “unseeing” gives us is a mystical vision of the whole. It is like Emerson’s experience: “I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all” (792). The semi-human characters in Woolf’s *The Waves* suggest to Marcus that this “mystical eye-less book” is also a mystical I-less book, of all Woolf’s books the one in which ego is most diminished (14). Marcus implies here a celebration of the reunion of the whole.

It is therefore not surprising that in *To the Lighthouse* the painter Lily, groping for a whole vision of Mrs. Ramsay, would need “fifty pairs of eyes to see with” (266). For Lily Briscoe/Virginia Woolf, what a painter/writer aspires to is to grasp as unity the polyphonic voices in/of the mind. To deal with one’s muses in such a mystical state, one thus needs a faculty beyond his or her biological form—“some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes” (*To the Lighthouse* 266-67). And that was also why Woolf, while pondering the true nature of sexuality, created Orlando as a persona who breaks through the limitations of binary sexuality as well as those of normal human time.

In fact Woolf’s practice of the stream of consciousness technique was also motivated by her faithful confrontation with the inner voices of her mind. In proposing a reason for Woolf’s use of stream of consciousness, Humphrey says that “Virginia

Woolf wanted to formulate the possibilities and processes of inner realization of truth—a truth she reckoned to be inexpressible; hence only on a level of the mind that is not expressed could she find this process of realization functioning” (12). Before composing her highly experimental works, Woolf once foretold in her diary: I have “arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel”—“no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion humor, everything as bright as fire in the mist” (*A Writer’s Diary* 22). Though we may sense the presence of all three mentors behind it, perhaps this “new form for a new novel” was forged primarily through her aunt’s influence.

“To sit down in silence could at least pledge me to nothing” said Caroline Stephen, expressing her longing for spiritual freedom by escaping formal meanings and words (*Quaker Strongholds* 3). Compared with Caroline’s inward search for divine unity, Stephen’s and Pater’s respective searches for truth and beauty seemed too worldly and too wordy. But on the other hand, just as neither Stephen nor Pater could satisfy Woolf, Caroline’s mystical escape from the world could not pacify her agitated mind. In spite of Woolf’s abhorrence of Stephen’s tyrannical rigidity, Pater’s hegemonic aestheticism, and the conflicts aroused by their contradiction, Stephen’s and Pater’s concern with people corresponded to Woolf’s passion for the world. Their knowledge of truth and beauty satisfied her intellectual appetite. And that was something for which her aunt’s silence or “nothingness” could not substitute. Though Caroline’s religious sublimation offered Woolf “an ideal retreat” (*Letters* 144) when she was suffering from mental collapse, it also disconnected her from the secular world.

Therefore, though Caroline kept encouraging Woolf by celebrating the advantage of a lack of education, Woolf was never satisfied with such a “primitive” state. In fact, she had been tutored in classical Greek and Latin at home, versed in several modern European languages, and had read copious amounts of literature, philosophy, and history with her father in his library. Regarding her brother Thoby’s education at Cambridge, we know from her biography (Bell, *Virginia Woolf* 70-71) that Woolf even expressed her resentment and jealousy. “Just as I feel in the mood to talk about these things,” said Woolf in a letter to Thoby with a humorous tone, “you go and plant yourself in Cambridge”(Letters 45-46). This finally accounted for Woolf’s anxiety about being submerged in the “semi mystic very profound life of a woman,” as described in her diary (*Diary* 118).

IV. Writing as a Ritual of Mystical Contemplation

It is apparent that, although each of these three mentors' philosophies descends from Plato's idealism, each represents a distinctive idea and even contradicts in certain ways the others. None of the three, therefore, could by itself dominate and exclusively influence Woolf's mind or spirit. The influence has come from the combination of all three. Therefore here, by way of suggesting a possible synthesis of these views, I want to return to a Neoplatonic/Plotinian perspective.

Central to Plato's philosophy is the division of all reality into the realm of ideas and the realm of sensibles. But although Plato elevates one of the ideas—that of the Good—above the others, calling it beyond being and even treating it as the one source of all existence, he does not finally make clear the relation between this unifying idea of the Good and the still higher One (or Parmenidean One Being), which (on the mystical reading of Plato) might be indeterminate, ineffable, even self-contradictory, thus *not* a self-identity. It is not until Plotinus develops a full-fledged theory of the One that the Absolute is confirmed as the highest principle or cause of the universe. Based on Plato's tripartite model of his philosophical system (the first or the king, the second, and the third) in the *Second Letter*, Plotinus establishes the three cosmic realms of the One, Intelligence, and Soul, describing in this way the three hypostases or stages of "emanation" of the universe.

According to Plotinus, precisely because the One is the principle of everything that is, above being and thus undifferentiated, void of any cognition or even self-cognition. As for the realm of *Nous* or Intelligence, because it is emanated from the One it lacks the primal unitary state of being. Here, for the first time, multiplicity appears. But, on the other hand, being the primary emanation from the One, Intelligence still possesses something of the unitary nature of the One. Therefore, while the One is absolute oneness, the unity of Intelligence lies in the form of its changeless ideas. Finally the Soul, the third hypostasis or stage of emanation, is the involuntary overflow of Intelligence and thus shares with its origin the same unity of one and multiplicity. But because it comes at the third state of emanation, the unity of one and multiplicity in Soul is now conditioned by time: due to its temporally-grounded desire to become something distinct, Soul tends to break away from the unity of Intelligence. This is how inferior souls become immersed in bodies (in matter), e.g., human souls in human bodies. However, Soul can potentially be reunited with Intelligence and

(through it) with the One: mystics seek to purify their souls through contemplation of the One because they hope to *return* to it.

Taking this Plotinian model then as a sort of analogy, we might say that Stephen's truth, Pater's beauty and even Caroline's divinity can, from Woolf's perspective, reach only to the level of Intelligence (Mind, *Nous*), not to the prior One from which Intelligence itself emanates. Thus they appeared to her as mutually contradictory points of view and Woolf was ambivalent, internally conflicted, suffering from a certain anxiety as to whether she herself could (as these three did not) reach the One. Here I am further suggesting that it was primarily due to her aunt's inspiration, her encouraging Woolf to write, that the author learned to confront her soul, the source of vitality in each creature, and thus awakened the original divine spirit within herself. In any event she seemed to have achieved a more mature acceptance of, perhaps "union," with her three mentors, and so too a more unified spiritual force in her creative writing.

Therefore in *Mrs. Dalloway* we do not get a continuous narration of Clarissa Dalloway's life (or even of her one single day) but the mapping out of her delicate state of mind, a mapping which conveys to us the author's ecstatic confrontation with the meaning of life and death. For by setting Clarissa's party day against the background of Shakespeare's "fear no more the heat o' the sun" line,³ it is the encompassing aura of death or nothingness rather than the trivial round of daily life that Woolf chose to foreground. This aura permeates and encompasses the human community, or human existences, of the novel. We are given, with this state of mind, not just Clarissa's memory of her homosexual lover Sally and her heterosexual lover Peter, not just Septimus Warren Smith's horror of war and death or Rezia's concerns about Septimus, but an interwoven memory which itself points to the birth of a new order, a new (almost trans-human) meaning. Thus the airplane's sky-writing draws together all the world's nerves:

"K [...] R [...]" said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say "Kay Arr" close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A

³ With Shakespeare's line "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" recurring through the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*, clearly the confrontation with man's mortality is one of the important themes of this novel. An ode to disengagement from mortal gains and pains, this song in which the line is embedded is in fact a lament for the supposedly dead Imogen, sung in *Cymbeline* 4.2.

marvelous discovery indeed—that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! [...] But he [Septimus] would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more. [...] But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibers with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A Child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. (16-17)

With the effacement of each individual's self-identity, a sense of cosmic union is gradually reached. Thus, in the mystical "standing out" ("ecstasy") of each character, a new identity emerges. And it is a new identity created not only by fusing Clarissa and Septimus, Peter and Richard and Sally, but also the work and its author, the author and her reader. Multiplicities are merged into one. And this joyous state of oneness is something like—even if we speak only in metaphorical or analogical terms, terms which it is not certain Woolf thinks we could ever transcend—what Plotinus calls the One, that highest "state" which all mystics aspire to attain. Brought into Septimus's own trance-like state, the virtually trans-human (or at least trans-rational) state of madness, readers may experience the sense of freedom that comes from being disengaged from mortal norms and forms:

Men must not cut down trees. There is God. [...] He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death [...]. Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death [...]. (18-19)

In Woolf's delicate artistry that interweaves life and death, then, we may discern traces or traits of all three mentors. Here we have the sense of Christian revivalism ("in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk how there is no death"), or some form of spiritual enlightenment, which reminds us of Caroline's spirituality. Yet we could also read this passage in the light of Pater's impressionistic style. The Paterian "saturation" technique is also clear in the following passage, which portrays Clarissa's mental state when she realizes lady Bruton has skipped her on the list of invitations:

"Fear no more," said Clarissa. Fear no more the heat o' the sun; for the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers; so she rocked: so she shivered. [...] She put the pad on the hall table. She began to go slowly upstairs, with her hand on the banisters, as if she had left a party, where now this friend now that had flashed back her face, her voice; had shut the door and gone out and stood alone, a single figure against the appalling night, or be accurate, against the stare of this matter-of-fact June morning [...] since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. (22-23)

Yet we are often aware as well of Clarissa's/Woolf's social concerns, suggesting Stephen's influence:

There they [Clarissa and Sally] sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out. The ideas were Sally's, of course—but very soon she was just as excited—read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelley by the hour. (25)

It was after all only in the moment of writing that Woolf could liberate herself from all *particular* doctrines, intellectual limitations, psychological problems. "It is only by putting it into words that I *make it whole*," she said in "A Sketch of the Past" (*Moments of Being* 72; my emphasis). Writing, in other words, became a ritual of mystical transmutation for the writer. Under Leslie Stephen's and Walter Pater's

influence, Woolf established a certain knowledge of the world; under Caroline Stephen's, her soul was opened up to the spirits and to the inner light; but it was only through the act of *writing*, a form of contemplation proceeding through the powers of recollection and imagination deep in her soul, that Woolf was able to penetrate to the core of life's wholeness.

V. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf then combines the mystical influences of Pater and the two Stephens and maintains an equilibrium between what we might call intelligence and soul. Above all she is a writer who keeps seeking the truth from within, and the representation of her truth comes only through art. We thus can only reach her knowledge or vision of the One through her highly poetic prose. It is precisely here that this "One" disintegrates into a multiplicity of inner voices, sense impressions, atoms in the very random and fleeting moment that they strike the mind, and then reintegrate into an ineffable whole, the "unknown and uncircumscribed spirit":

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being "like this." Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old [...]. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit [...] ("Modern Fiction" 2923-24)

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Recent studies of Virginia Woolf's career have increasingly presented her fiction as autobiographical fable. This book returns to the literary career and treats generic questions raised by the novels themselves. Maria DiBattista centers her study on the nature of narrative voice and narrative authority in the novels, arguing that Woolf surmounts the modernist crisis of sub Recent studies of Virginia Woolf's career have increasingly presented her fiction as autobiographical fable. This book returns to the literary career and treats generic questions raised by the novels themselves.