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RECYCLED LIVES: PORTRAITS OF THE WOOLFS AS SITTING DUCKS

By HAROLD FROMM

Every age has its curious and sometimes inhuman games and sports, wrought to satisfy strange and perverse human needs. As society becomes more "mental," however, we turn up our noses at such primitive pastimes as cockfighting and bearbaiting (despite a sizable subculture that still gets its kicks from shooting people) and try to exercise our aggressions in acts from an armchair or a typewriter or simply by watching TV. Among the intelligentsia, political reappropriation is the current mode for attempting to compensate for the loss of socially sanctioned beliefs and aggressions and the power and relief they confer. And it can also be effective in making virtues out of the deficiencies of individual personalities. Thus rewriting history becomes a favored methodology for alienated minorities. And nowadays, since almost everybody is a member of an alienated minority, lots of rewriting is taking place. Although some of this may periodically be both necessary and justified, much of it is socially destructive and ultimately self-defeating. For if every individual were entitled to social recognition of his private or group mythology, there would no longer be a society to protect the individual freedoms derived from this recognition, only a war of all against all. In the world of letters, already suffering from the manifold ills of hyper-politicization, one of the overriding obsessional vehicles for reappropriation is the lives of Virginia and Leonard Woolf.

Although the use of literary works for private ends has been

a common enough phenomenon for a long time—most recently the works of Hesse, the existentialists, Lawrence, Marx, Heidegger, Rousseau, and Walter Benjamin have been favored—what is novel about the present rapacious interest in the Woolfs is that their lives even more than their writings are being used for political purposes, lives that are taken apart and relived as though their episodes and events were passages in the pages of fiction, texts open for indeterminate reinterpretation.

Whereas novels and poems are created to be responded to, interpreted, and incorporated by the reader, the living of one's life—apart from monarchs, presidents, and rock stars—is generally thought to be an end in itself. One lives a life "for itself," as a "subject," and one's words and deeds are the product of the necessities of one's own personality. It is not necessary to inscribe Kant's categorical imperative over the portals to find disturbing and unnerving the freedom with which various political and personal interests rifle through the lives of artists now dead in order to subject them to current standards of value and to find them wanting. If NOW were indeed that one far-off divine event toward which all of creation has been moving, a show of plausibility, however thin, might be derived for manipulating and attacking lives of the past. But NOW is simply the latest imperfection; NOW is only today's bundle of kinks, and some bundles are kinkier than others, as the ensuing examples may reveal.

It isn't so hard to suggest why the lives of Virginia and Leonard Woolf should have come to lend themselves so excessively well to contemporary revisionism as lives in need of being relived. As a result of the extraordinary quantity of material that has been published about the Woolfs, including of course their own autobiographical writings and Virginia's letters, their lives can be seen to have been lived in a milieu that was once associated with a small, creative elite but which, like most social forms, has become more and more the milieu of a large portion of today's democratized masses. In the areas of sexuality, creativity,

politics, sexual roles, marital relations, social conventions, feminism, madness and other psychological malaises, Judaism, anti-Semitism, family life, and whatnot, their lives give a foretaste of things to come in society at large as the spread of higher education causes greater numbers of people to break away from traditional social forms.

The Woolfs thus become perfect sitting ducks for an ambiguous kind of reappropriation and politicization. On the one hand, since they are seen as having been resistant to many of the conventions of their own time, they are readily taken up as models of assertive self-definition in the face of a repressive majority. But on the other hand, since they did not have the advantage of being postmoderns, that is, of being us, they can also be seen as having failed to realize to its fullest their will to power, or more accurately, *our* will to power. In this failure, they become culpable as betrayers of the NOW revolution. Had they been purely conventional, they would now repose beneath serious notice. But having risen above the conventions of their time, they can now be remarked as special while being put down as not special enough. If Virginia is sometimes praised as a "patrician" who lived her life as she pleased without concern for middle-class respectability, she can also be attacked as an "elitist" who regarded aesthetic quality as the principal criterion of merit while failing to take sufficiently serious interest in her more plebian feminist "sisters." If Leonard can be applauded as a saintly and almost uxorious husband who did not let his own career hamper the interests of his wife, he can also be criticized as a suffocating custodian who was so solicitous about his wife's health that he "denied" her the primal experience of having children. In a no-win game like this, they can be pulled every which way in order to suit the needs of every party.

II

One of the earliest salvos to be fired in the burgeoning Bloomsbury circus was Cynthia Ozick's "Mrs. Virginia

Woolf" (*Commentary*, August 1973). Like her earlier *Commentary* piece on E.M. Forster, her Woolf essay (occasioned by the publication of Quentin Bell's biography) displays a marvelous prose instrument wielded by a keen critical intelligence. And yet, the politics of appropriation, the aggrandizing self (the terms are apposite), have Ozick in so desperate a grip that the resulting discussion of the Woolfs and her particularized attack on Leonard Woolf turn into a violation of the spirit, an invasion of the soul—something out of a Hawthorne story like "The Birthmark," in which sinister powers masquerading as science destroy the very ground of human freedom.

What on earth could have caused Ozick to wage so cruel a quarrel with the Woolfs? What Virgilian fever could have prompted her to heap *ex post facto* afflictions upon so excellent a man as Leonard? *Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* Can there be such anger in highbrow souls? But the answer seems clear enough: that *for her* Leonard Woolf did not display sufficient interest in his own Jewish identity. Not content to be merely a Jew, he wanted to be both an Englishman and a citizen of the world. For Ozick, whose Jewish self-consciousness has the intensity which only anachronism can supply, this is the ultimate betrayal. Drawing upon Woolf's autobiography, Ozick quotes his remarks about his grandfather:

"No one could have mistaken him for anything but a Jew. Although he wore coats and trousers, hats and umbrellas, just like those of all the other gentlemen in Addison Gardens, he looked to me as if he might have stepped straight out of one of those old pictures of caftaned, bearded Jews in a ghetto. . . ." Such Jews, he notes, were equipped with "a fragment of spiritual steel, a particle of passive and unconquerable resistance," but otherwise the character, and certainly the history, of the Jews do not draw him. "My father's father was a Jew," he writes, exempting himself by two generations. "I have always felt in my bones and brain and heart English and, more narrowly, a Londoner, but with a

nostalgic love of the city and civilization of ancient Athens." He recognizes that his "genes and chromosomes" are something else; he is a "descendent" of "the world's official fugitives and scapegoats." . . . But a "descendant" is not the same as a member. A descendant shares an origin, but not necessarily a destiny.

Thus we get our first major clue to Ozick's exasperation. Aware of his roots, ultrasensitive to the traditional plight of the Jews, Woolf is nonetheless uninterested in making a life out of parochial sectarianism. "A descendant shares an origin, but not necessarily a destiny," she observes, and for Ozick this will not do at all. Her belief is that the birthmark is the man, especially if the mark happens to be his Jewishness. The rest of her essay is an attempt to destroy the man in order to rescue the birthmark—her birthmark.

Insisting that Woolf lacked the self-knowledge that would have informed him that he, too, and not just his grandfather, looked like a Jew from an old ghetto picture; characterizing him as resembling "a student at the yeshiva," she asks: "What prompted Leonard Woolf to go into Germany in the very hour Jews were being abused there? Did he expect Nazi street hoodlums to distinguish between an English Jewish face and a German Jewish face?" She does not stop to give a reply, but the odious answer is clear enough: he preferred to be a human being instead of merely a Jew.

But Ozick's quarrel with Woolf extends beyond the matter of his "failure" to adopt a Jewish identity; it includes Virginia Stephen as well and, most importantly, the "use" that Leonard made of her (the quotation marks are mine). After citing Quentin Bell's account of Virginia's meeting with Leonard's mother, who seemed even more alien and strange than Leonard himself had seemed, strange because of their Jewishness, Ozick writes:

This aspect of Virginia Stephen's marriage to Leonard Woolf is usually passed over in silence. I have rehearsed it here at such length not to emphasize it for its own sake—there is nothing novel about upper-class English distaste for

Jews—but to make a point about Leonard. He is commonly depicted as, in public, a saintly socialist, and, in private, a saintly husband. He was probably both; but he also knew, like any percipient young man in love with a certain segment of society, how to seize vantage ground . . . Whether Leonard Woolf fell in love with a young woman of beauty and intellect, or more narrowly with a Stephen of beauty and intellect, will always be a formidable, and a necessary question.

Formidable to some, perhaps, if they happen to insist on unusual standards of moral purity. But with all the rancor of the above passage and the invidiousness that permeates this entire essay, one is very apt to question the purity of the motives behind such standards. For what, after all, was Leonard Woolf's moral flaw according to Ozick? To put it bluntly, that he chased *goyim*; one, to be exact. And what is worse, she was upper-class English. Instead of looking into the mirror to discover and acknowledge his ineradicable Jewishness, his mark of Cain; instead of seeing his Jewishness as the alpha and omega of his existence, and his destiny as the art of capitalizing on the persona of an eternal scapegoat, he chose to inhabit a larger universe; indeed, to be a *mensch*. For this, Ozick cannot forgive him.

What Leonard needed in Virginia was not so much her genius as her madness. It made possible for him the exercise of one thing Bloomsbury had no use for: uxoriousness. It allowed him the totality of his seriousness unchecked. It *used* this seriousness, it gave it legitimate occupation, it made it both necessary and awesome. And it made *her* serious. Without the omnipresent threat of disintegration, freed from the oppression of continuous vigil against breakdown, what might Virginia's life have been? The flirtation with Clive [Bell] hints at it: she might have lived, at least outwardly, like Vanessa [Bell]. It was his wife's insanity, in short, which made tenable the permanent—the secure presence in Bloomsbury of Leonard himself. Her madness fed his genius for responsibility; it became for him a corridor of access to her genius. The spirit of Bloomsbury was not Leonard's, his

temperament was against it—Bloomsbury could have done without him. So could a sane Virginia.

And as if this were not already the Unpardonable Sin, as if seriousness and responsibility were human interests to be disparaged, Leonard adjusted only too quickly, says Ozick, to the disappointments engendered by his wife's various afflictions: "A wife who is seen to be frigid as well as mad is simply taken for that much sicker [as opposed to being perfectly healthy?]. But too ready a reconciliation to bad news is also a kind of abandonment, and Leonard seems very early to have relinquished, or allowed Virginia to relinquish, the sexual gratifications of marriage." As for his reputed "saintliness" in nursing his wife so that she could continue to write novels, Ozick asks: "A saint who successfully secures acquiescence in frigidity, childlessness, dependency? Perhaps; probably; of course."

Of course, too, without Leonard, as we are reminded, there would have been no Woolf novels and (one ought to add) probably no Virginia to write them. His vice was to devote his life to preserving her being as well as her sanity. Why did he not just let her sink into madness?

Why did he not? . . . Because she was his wife; because she was the beloved one to whom he had written during the courtship, "You don't know what a wave of happiness comes over me when I see you smile . . ."; because his conscience obliged him to; because she suffered; because—this before much else—it was in his nature to succor suffering. And also: because of her gift; because of her genius; for the sake of literature; because she was unique. And because she had been a Miss Stephen; because she was Thoby Stephen's sister; because she was, like Leonard's vision of Cambridge itself, "compounded of . . . the atmosphere of long years of history and great traditions and famous names [and] a profoundly civilized life"; because she was Bloomsbury; because she was England . . . In her he had married a kind of escutcheon; she represented the finest grain of the finest stratum in England. *What he shored up against disintegra-*

tion was the life he had gained—a birthright he paid for by wheedling porridge between Virginia Woolf's resisting lips.
[My italics]

After such a display of indecency, one is driven to ask yet again, what is that Unpardonable Sin capable of reducing all of Leonard's remarkable virtues to nothing but grounds for execration and loathing? Nothing more than that he forgot—or failed to care—that no matter what his aspirations or achievements, in the final analysis, he was only and always a yeshiva boy “wheedling porridge” into the mouth of an Anglo-shiksa instead of comfortably relaxing into the superior role of a stigmatized ghetto waif.

Ozick's assault on Leonard Woolf, more demeaning to herself than to him, exhibits the all-too-familiar way in which political positions develop as emanations of private psychological needs and then are projected as binding morality upon a resisting outside world. This becomes all the more easy to do in the last quarter of the 20th century when biographical materials are more available than they have ever been before in human history. With letters, journals, diaries, biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs pouring off the presses, there is a vivid illusion that the lives of other people now dead are really there, laid out before our eyes as accessible texts that can be examined and reexamined for unlimited interpretation and use, like *Finnegans Wake*. Combined with the legacy of psychoanalysis, itself questionable, but further cheapened by the amateur psychopolitics of litterateurs, these masses of biographical data lend themselves quite easily to revisionist appropriation by intellectual special-interest groups, the way that other kinds of interest groups bomb railway stations in Bologna, set up temples in Guyana, or abduct famous people for ransom and murder.

As for Ozick, a sophisticated intellectual who has taken up the primitive rituals of a sort of fundamentalist Judaism and who finds herself in the inevitably defensive position of intellectuals who adopt archaic or reactionary ideologies

which they nevertheless insist on throwing in the faces of their incredulous contemporaries, she can only be incensed by the cool skepticism of a fellow Jew like Leonard Woolf, whose religious commitment to Judaism was minimal even though he had an obsessive awareness of the perennial sufferings of the Jewish people. Like T.S. Eliot, who ludicrously proclaimed his allegiance to Anglicanism, royalism, and classicism and who found it necessary to attack "free-thinking Jews" in his notorious *After Strange Gods*, Ozick finds that she must attack Woolf's disdain of primitive religiosity in order to strengthen the plausibility of her own recidivism. For to Ozick as to Eliot, *freethinking* Jews constitute an omnipresent threat to an orthodoxy that is always vulnerable to ridicule. The last thing in the world required by an emperor's new clothes is a tailor, especially when the fantasized clothes are actually in tatters, having been acquired centuries too late from an ideological resale shop.

III

When we turn to Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* we find ourselves in a more familiar world of discourse. Despite its wealth of information and its attempts to structure or restructure the history of women's writing since the 18th century, the book has been written principally according to a feminist program. This turns out, unfortunately, to be its most serious weakness, for its combination of literary history, revisionist critical readings, and feminist politics results in a scattershot assault that finally seems to have led nowhere. Though Showalter is clearly polemical, it is never fully clear what she really is attacking.

Dividing the literary history of women into three major phases, she sees the earliest as a period of "feminine" writing, in which women fiction-writers mostly remained in their historically and socially assigned roles in relation to men, while complaining about or quietly undermining the established structure. In the second or "feminist" phase, a

more consciously belligerent and political movement takes place in which women writers are openly antagonistic to the prevailing male social structure. Although the reader is led to expect that the third phase, that of 20th century "female" literature, will move very close to a point of womanly self-realization, this does not appear to be the case. There are no "female" writers who satisfactorily play their roles for Showalter, not even those she treats at the end of her book and who at first look most promising, Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble. Both of them defect from unabashed "femaleness" by either finally accepting what is merely traditional or by going off into otherworldly fantasy. We are left with a sense that Showalter has been writing about a race of beings who have not yet begun to have any actual existence. For when all the stages of women's writing are judged inadequate and when all of these women writers have failed to live their lives in a way that is satisfying to Showalter (whatever that may be), we feel that she has been engaged in a quasi-religious exercise in which the actual world of daily existence, like that of traditional Christianity, is only an empty show, with *real being* scheduled to take place as some far-off divine event, when this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal, immortality.

Amidst such a scenario, Virginia Woolf appears as just another one of those "female" writers who have shirked their true vocation, in this case by taking a "flight into androgyny." Showalter's chapter on Woolf, like her *passim* references to her throughout the book, invariably levels charges of "evasion." Although Woolf falls into the period of the "female" novelist, Showalter finds her writing suffused with the failure of nerve that characterizes the merely "feminine." Thus, "the delicacy and verbal fastidiousness of Virginia Woolf is an extension of this feminized language." This paralyzing refinement "forced women to find innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life, and led to a fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic, and profound."

Paradoxically, the more female this literature became in the formal and theoretical sense, the farther it moved from exploring the physical experience of women. Sexuality hovers on the fringes of the aestheticists' novels and stories, disguised, veiled, and denied. Androgyny, the sexual ethic of Bloomsbury and an important concept of the period, provided an escape from the confrontation with the body. Erotically charged and drenched with sexual symbolism, female aestheticism is nonetheless oddly sexless in its content. Again, "a room of one's own," with its insistence on artistic autonomy and its implied disengagement from social and sexual involvement, was a favorite image.

A good deal of this discontent with virtually all of her women writers stems from the fact that Showalter is much less interested in their art than in their lives. Although writers first come to the public's attention because of their art, and although their art is the basis for a continued claim to such attention, politicians like Showalter are mainly concerned with lives, as if it was their lives that made them famous. Art, on the other hand, is seen as little more than a screen for vulgar substitute gratification. Thus, after her curious reading of a Dorothy Richardson who seems mostly unrecognizable, and as a prelude to a reading of Woolf that will seem equally unrecognizable, Showalter observes, "The female aesthetic was meant for survival, and one cannot deny that Richardson was able to produce an enormous novel, or that Virginia Woolf wrote several, under its shelter. But ultimately, how much better it would have been if they could have forgiven themselves, if they could have faced the anger instead of denying it, could have translated the consciousness of their own darkness into confrontation instead of struggling to transcend it. For when the books were finished, the darkness was still with them, as dangerous and as inviting as it had always been, and they were helpless to fight it." A translation of these remarks into less portentous language betrays the essentially plebian ethos of Showalter's operations: writing novels helped these women to bear up under

the stress of being females in a male-dominated society. But how much better off they would have been if they could have faced reality directly, not wasted their time fiddling with literature; if they could have told men to "chuck it," and crashed through the iron gates of life by exchanging the trivialities of art for the more serious business of the world. In other words, scrape away the neuroses of the artist and underneath you will find the real self, who turns out to be a sexed-up business executive, Showalter's unexpressed paradigm of health. Little wonder that creative people are scared to death of humdrum psychoanalysts, whose ultimate therapeutic goal is apt to be little more than a good screw. Freud and Kris, at least, were not so eager to cure artists of their art.

Inexplicably seeing Woolf's life as a tragedy, Showalter observes that "her adoption of a female aesthetic . . . ultimately proved inadequate to her purposes and stifling to her development." Yet it is hard to find a basis for such an outlook. For Woolf's life, in this universal vale of tears constituting mortality, was filled with as much gratification as anyone has a right to expect, and as far as her writing was concerned there was little in her life or art to hamper her successful development. No doubt her "female aesthetic" made it impossible to write *The Sun Also Rises* or *Ulysses*, but by the same token neither Hemingway nor Joyce was able to produce *To the Lighthouse* or *Between the Acts*. The essential question is why Showalter thinks that both women's art and women's lives should be built so closely upon the model established by men. Although the theoretical burden of her book is to reject such a model, she protests too much. The practical consequence of her dismissal of women writers' lives and works (by seeing them all as taken over by substitute gratifications) is that men become the criterion for both art and life. This stance lurks behind such a remark as "Woolf is the architect of female space, a space that is both sanctuary and prison. Through their windows, her women observe a more violent masculine world in which their own anger, rebellion, and sexuality can be articulated at a safe

remove." The apparent lesson to be learned is that women should abandon their evasive cloisters and behave like men.

Like Ozick, Showalter attacks Leonard Woolf for his protectiveness, his practice of consulting doctors who forced a "rest cure" upon his wife, his insistence upon childlessness. Again, instead of living a quiet life writing books, Virginia Woolf should have produced children who could be dropped off at a day-care center (the sine qua non of contemporary emancipation) while she went off to IBM to become an executive capable of tossing her male underlings into bed for a jolly unrepressed tumble. But instead of such a profound self-realization, "she sought a serene androgynous 'oneness,' an embrace of eternity that was inevitably an embrace of death. In recognizing that the quest for androgyny was Woolf's solution to her existential dilemma, we should not confuse flight with liberation." In the light of the failure of all of Showalter's women to achieve "liberation," and to the extent that their literary productions were hampered and misshaped by their "repressed" life roles, the reader of her book becomes witness to another variant of the Utopian-Christian-Marxist vision in which all of actual life is dismissed as phantasm, as preparation for the *real* life that is yet to take place. Art is just another form of seeing through a glass darkly, until face to face becomes possible. And for Showalter, face to face may mean little more than a romanticized version of uninhibited routine sex. Men, as usual, are the lucky ones, since their lives and values, however disgusting, have been the only real ones. Thus, unless Showalter's vision of the gratified life is based upon intimations of a species yet to be evolved, the moral is clear: Utopia arrives when women become like men.

Showalter's assault on Virginia Woolf ends, however, with a few backhanded concessions. "Yet," she writes, "there is a kind of power in Woolf's fiction that comes from the occasional intense emotion that resists digestion by the lyric prose." True, this is only another way of saying that Woolf succeeds only when her intense emotions resist being trans-

formed into art. But Showalter is not ultimately interested in art. "For Mrs. Ramsay, death is a mode of self-assertion. Refined to its essences, abstracted from its physicality and anger, denied any action, Woolf's vision of womanhood is as deadly as it is disembodied. The ultimate room of one's own is the grave." It hardly seems worth adding that it is a room awaiting everyone, however liberated. Showalter's equation of art with death makes us wonder why she bothers to take notice of women *writers* in the first place when her real interest is political. But politics, like "death," is just another mode of "self-assertion." And triumph over "death" through politics is just another mode of self-deception.

IV

When we turn to Exhibit C, we find ourselves in yet another territory, this the most perplexing of all. For in the *Times Literary Supplement* of Oct. 31, 1980, in what purported to be a review of the final volume of Virginia Woolf's letters, Phyllis Grosskurth produced a series of virtually inconsecutive paragraphs which only extreme generosity could characterize as an essay. Indeed, only extreme generosity could enable the reader to suppose that Grosskurth was quite all right when she produced this wild and incoherent outpouring. Since her biography of Havelock Ellis as well as a series of substantial reviews in *TLS* and the *New Republic* following the one on Woolf's letters all represent Grosskurth quite favorably, one is forced to assume that the subject of the Woolfs has once again liberated demons.

Grosskurth's review-essay, like all incoherence, resists summary, but a distillation, however unsatisfactory, is here required. It appears that despite all the evidence to the contrary, Grosskurth regards the marriage of the Woolfs as anything but harmonious. (This is not to suggest that the Woolfs had no differences, but a relationship of total harmony is hard to conceive.) Much of the "evidence" for this opinion seems to come from Virginia's three suicide notes, all of

which praise Leonard for his goodness and express a desire to spare him from any further suffering from having to nurse a mentally ill wife. (Books by Roger Poole and Stephen Trombly resist the notion that Virginia was mentally ill, but it is not possible to consider here such gross reconstitutions of reality.) Grosskurth takes all of Virginia's praise of Leonard as merely the surface protestations of a very deep hostility. As if this account weren't problematical enough, she also sees Virginia as a relentlessly bitchy anti-Semite who lost few opportunities to fling mud at Jews, not excluding her own husband. As a counterpart to this surmise and quite contrary to Ozick (the Woolfs are as inexhaustible as the cosmos), Grosskurth regards Leonard as obsessed almost to derangement with the history and fate of the Jews, so much so in fact that as a subject of contemplation his wife offered very little competition against it for a hold upon his mind. The final chink in this quivering edifice is filled by means of a series of dark innuendoes to the effect that far from being taken unawares by his wife's death by drowning, Leonard may at the least have been an abettor and at the most a devious engineer in this painful denouement of her life!

Though some of Grosskurth's assertions are not entirely without foundation (e.g.: Virginia did seem ambivalent about Jews, but on the other hand she married one, hardly out of desperation; Virginia *was* hostile to being locked up, as it were, during her periods of madness), the implications of her thickly woven plot take one's breath away, while her tone and observations suffer from an ambiguity that grows increasingly incomprehensible:

The cult that has grown around Virginia Woolf would be slightly comic were it not for her suicide. She is no longer a fallible woman, but a complex image constructed of woman, writer, suicide—an objectified symbol of our death instinct. The quality of her work has been confused with a deeply neurotic, rather frightening human being. Throughout these volumes we have witnessed the spectacle of an ego held in

precarious balance between eros and thanatos, a spectacle which appeals to morbid voyeurism. That final act might have been cathartic were it not for some grave problems raised by Nigel Nicolson in the appendix to this last volume.

The meaning of each sentence here, like most of the other sentences in the essay, poses a problem: why does Woolf's suicide change the character of her cult? Why has suicide exempted her from fallible womanhood? How does she objectify "our death instinct"? What does it mean to confuse her work with a deeply neurotic and frightening human being? If she is neurotic and frightening, why is she no longer fallible? What exactly was this balance between eros and thanatos? Is not Grosskurth herself a morbid voyeur? Why would Woolf's suicide have been "cathartic" and for whom? And why do Nigel Nicolson's editorial remarks about Woolf's suicide notes prevent her death from being cathartic to whomever?

Grosskurth makes much of an interesting essay by Susan Kenney (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, Summer 1975) on the relationship between Woolf's suicide and her last novel, *Between the Acts*, incorporating Kenney's essay into the larger fantasia of her own psychofictions. Putting on the mantle of divine judgment (which by now has become a bit threadbare after heavy wear by Ozick and Showalter), Grosskurth finds that Leonard was insufficiently apprehensive when Virginia returned from a walk soaking wet about ten days before her drowning. According to Grosskurth, he merely "makes a single terse entry in his diary that she seems 'unwell.'" (Grosskurth seems to subscribe to that peculiar school of biography that assumes the subject's total life has been written into diaries and letters.) If Leonard could only have suspected all the harpies lying in wait for the swoop-down years later, he would surely have written more acceptable journals for their benefit. And when Virginia finally does drown herself, Grosskurth presents the following scenario:

He searched for some time, he says, and then informed the police. In the official search, how thoroughly was the river dragged? If it was thought that the body had been washed out to sea, where did the draggers commence the search? At whose direction? The Ouse is a tidal river, but not fast flowing. How could her body have been wedged in some underwater debris? It would surely have required some very heavy rocks to have held it down, until it was found three weeks later *floating* like a decomposed Ophelia. Further: if Leonard was such a beloved figure in the village of Rodmell as he implies in that curious, tortuous account, "Virginia's Death," why would anyone even suspect that he had done away with his wife as Kenney states they did? In fact, how does she know there was such gossip? A statement like that is irresponsible if not backed up with solid evidence. Kenney's suspicions seem to have been aroused mainly because she finds the ending of the posthumously published *Between the Acts* so positive that she does not believe that Virginia could actually have intended suicide. What she does not consider is Leonard's brief mention of Virginia's death amid pages devoted to the persecution of the Jews and nostalgic memories of Cambridge friends, nor the questionable choice of photographs, not one of which is of Virginia Woolf. Above all, there is the curious section about his own intense compassion when forced to drown some day-old puppies when he was a boy:

I put one of them in the bucket of water, and instantly an extraordinary, a terrible thing happened. This blind, amorphous thing began to fight desperately for its life, struggling, beating the water with its paws.

Leonard does not see any connection between this incident and his wife's tragedy; yet he manages to relate it to what generations of Gentiles have done to the Jews.

Adequate comment on such a discourse seems impossible. The shifting timbres, tones, and viewpoints of this prose are more alarming, more terrifying, than anything Grosskurth can cite about the Woolfs. Although at first she appears to be suggesting that Susan Kenney's report about the villagers' suspicions of Leonard is unfounded, she then immediately goes on to suggest that there really *is* good evidence of

Leonard's crime—namely, that he failed to include a photo of Virginia within the pages dealing with her death in *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*. And what is the connection that Leonard fails to see between his horror at drowning the puppies and his wife's death? Presumably its occult revelation to the world that he has murdered his wife!

One last reference to Grosskurth's essay must suffice (since mankind cannot bear much more unreality): quoting at length a passage from *The Years* in which Sara bitterly alludes to sharing a bathroom with a Jew who leaves hairs in the bathtub, Grosskurth refers to Quentin Bell's account of Virginia's nervousness when Leonard was reading the galleys of that novel (he had not read the manuscript). Then she remarks: "The scene of Virginia watching Leonard as he read the passage about the Jew could be a tableau from Strindberg. No wonder she was frightened. How could he ever forgive her for this most devastating of humiliations? How would he retaliate?" Not only does Grosskurth seem to think that no life was taking place for the Woolfs between the interstices of these texts, but this quite specific scene is wholly an invention of her own, extrapolated from Bell's account of Virginia's nervousness while Leonard was reading *The Years*, parts of which he read in her presence. "How would he retaliate?" Grosskurth asks, or makes Virginia ask. Again the answer is presumably obvious: by murdering his wife.

The series of letters to *TLS* that followed Grosskurth's shocking performance was surprisingly muted. John Lehmann, who had had a long relationship with the Woolfs stemming from their Hogarth Press days, replied first. (These replies ran from Nov. 7, 1980 through Jan. 23, 1981.) "I feel," Lehmann writes, "I must protest vehemently against the innuendoes about Leonard Woolf which run right through Phyllis Grosskurth's review." And commenting on the scene in which Leonard supposedly reads about the Jew in front of Virginia, he continues: "This is absurd, and worse, because

Leonard was not reading **only** the particular passage she refers to, but the whole long book in its page proofs."

A week later, Grosskurth replies to Lehmann: "The burden of my review was an attempt to question the widespread belief that Leonard was a devoted husband. Indeed, I go further: is it possible, I have suggested, that Leonard Woolf's treatment of Virginia could actually have hastened her death?" (Grosskurth seems to have quickly forgotten that the "treatment" was murder.) Two weeks later, Quentin Bell enters the fray: "On the whole the charges that Professor Grosskurth makes seem to reveal a degree of silliness which I must say shocks me in so eminent a writer." (Nothing can quite equal British reserve.) He then goes on to question her use of Virginia's novels to bolster her arguments and to point out inaccuracies in Susan Kenney's article.

A few weeks later, Susan Kenney writes a curious letter of her own. Thanking Grosskurth for making her essay famous, she then objects to the charge that she did not document her claim about village rumors that Leonard had done his wife in. She defends herself by alluding to unpublished letters at Sissinghurst Castle which she was permitted to inspect by Nigel Nicolson.

The whole affair finally comes to an end when Nigel Nicolson objects to Kenney's shaky support of her remark about the villagers. "She must be remembering a letter which I showed her from Vanessa Bell to my mother, Vita Sackville-West," in which Vanessa wrote that "Leonard had one anonymous letter saying 'The Coroner has been very kind to you.'" Vita's reply to Vanessa was, "Isn't it incredible?"

"This," says Nicolson, "is the only 'solid evidence' for Susan Kenney's allegation that village gossip took the extreme form that Leonard had murdered Virginia."

To try to decode Grosskurth's meaning and intent would be difficult: her essay engages in a series of reversals that mirror her own confused motivations. To discover what festering wound could have been soothed by such an all-out attack on

the Woolfs is impossible. What does remain for public consideration, however, after examining this essay, along with those of Ozick and Showalter, is the nature of these astonishing appropriations of other people's writings and—more seriously—other people's lives as screens upon which to project dissatisfactions with society and self. These projections can generally be distinguished from *bona fide* biographical work, whether historical or critical in character. Neither Ellmann's *James Joyce* nor Haight's *George Eliot*, powerful as they are, seem to be telling us more about the biographer's desires than the lives of their subjects. Their success stems from the fact that the biographers, despite their own psychological needs, are principally concerned with grasping the lives of their subjects (however ideal such a goal), not merely using these lives as vehicles for acting out personal, religious, or political obsessions. Even Crocker's life of Rousseau, for all its hackneyed psychologizing and limited conception of normality, gives us a Rousseau who is far from being just an advertisement for its author. And Phyllis Rose's *Virginia Woolf, Woman of Letters*, is open and clear enough about its feminist point of view and its theory of the relation between art and life so that we can be impressed with the justness of most of its insights even if we reject the operating principles as too facile.

But the visions and revisions of the Woolfs examined above inhabit a different psychological world. Intellectually, they are specimens of the familiar maimed outlook of post-Nietzschean culture in which the loss of a widespread transcendent ideology induces small groups and individuals to create their own homespun substitutes. After the death of God, the deity's scattered members take root as numerous pretenders briefly occupying the scene, each requiring passionate, fanatic, and arbitrary devotion. Unfortunately, if it is no longer possible to embrace one vast universal system of epistemology and morals, it is even less possible to accept other people's private revelations and the systems they generate. When these private revelations are built upon quirky valua-

tions of arbitrary data—in this case what Leonard did or didn't feed Virginia when she was (or wasn't) mad; whether Virginia *really* wanted children or just thought she did; why Leonard didn't include Virginia's photograph on such and such a page of his autobiography—the black comedy of contemporary unbelief becomes all the more palpable. For in place of the inexhaustibility of the Infinite we are offered the inexhaustibility of the Infinitesimal. Arbitrary bits of data become makeweights in private ethical and metaphysical systems. People are consigned to hell for not wholeheartedly committing themselves to this year's political shibboleths. The tyranny of the Universal is replaced by the tyranny of the Inconsequential.

But beyond the intellectual character of these revaluations of the Woolfs is the problem of their emotional character, and emotionally they function as a form of pornographic titillation for a middle-class intelligentsia who are too refined, perhaps, to be seen at adult bookstores and peep shows but who have passions of their own that need to be satisfied. If cheesecake and beefcake and X-rated movies can be accused of using other people's bodies as meat for gratification (a familiar cry of feminists), one can just as well charge these literary analysts with something even more harmful and degrading: a pornography of the soul. And if it can be said that cheesecake and beefcake provide, after all, a healthful stimulation of the body's juices, which have got to come out in one way or another anyhow, then perhaps a similar justification will have to be made for soulcake, a more complex and insidious phenomenon, a form of gossip elevated to metaphysical heights promising a transcendent payoff. But pornography, at least, is relatively direct and unpretentious, whereas Ozick, Showalter, and Grosskurth speak as if they were operating on a decidedly more celestial plane. But what exactly is that plane and why should psychological sport be a higher thing than physical?

In the present instances the lives of two extraordinary people have been separated from their writings in order to be

used in some sort of iconic, totemic fashion, like Jesus and Mary, who are no longer mere "people" but who indeed have had thrust upon them all the sins of the world. Have the Woolfs become the Linda Lovelaces of the intelligentsia? Should not their trivial nits—so voraciously picked—be put in proper perspective alongside the major gifts that they have left us? Is it not time to realize that, unlike their art, intended for public judgment, their lives—though open to examination—have been fully lived out and are not really up for grabs?

Is it not time to say, Enough already? Time to say, *Dona eis requiem?*