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## “Service, Not Power”: Leonard Woolf Revisited

AS BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY popular literary forms and as cultural politics have grown in variety and intensity, a new literary genre fusing the writing of lives with the making of political statements has gradually begun to sweep the literary scene: The Nonentity Biography. In its present stage of development, this curious genre favors the undistinguished lives of spouses of famous people, flowers that have perished unplucked, unrecognized, unpraised while their mates have been sunned and showered with all the glories. These neglected spouses are invariably the wives of celebrated men whose success is made to illustrate once again (and again) the tyranny of patriarchy. And more often than not, after all the huffing and puffing to cry them up, the upshot is likely to be that the wives' only claim to fame is that they happened to be married to gifted men.

Because of the current market for Nonentity Biography, some genuine entities of real merit continue to be neglected because their neglect does not serve to underscore the horrors of patriarchy, sexism, or majority ethnicity. In the case of Leonard Woolf, not only is he a spouse of the wrong sex, but he has also been seen as himself an instance of tyrannical masculinity who deprived his wife of children and treated her like an invalid, subjecting her to patriarchal Victorian doctors who practiced a bit too early to benefit from the real Freudian/Lacanian thing, a thing that is now being applied to Virginia Woolf with an intensity that can only be called “industrial strength.” So that while there are dozens of books (not counting the biographies) and innumerable book-chapters and articles that take Virginia apart and put her back together again (looking a bit like the Frankenstein monster at times), there are to my knowledge only two full-length books of any sort about Leonard, neither one a biography (one treats the writings and the other his political career) and neither one the sort of book needed to do him the justice he deserves as a major personage in his own right.

A big step forward, however, is a new and generous selection of his letters by Frederic Spotts that comes the closest yet to providing a

biography until a real one can be written.<sup>1</sup> And Spotts himself might well be Woolf's ideal biographer, judging from the remarkably lucid and plainspoken introductions he has written to each division of this collection, as well as his creative mastery of a great quantity of materials that he employs with wit and insight in both narratives and notes. Indeed, so artful are his selection, arrangement, and biographical contributions that he has succeeded in producing an actual "book" (with all of the emotional engagement this implies) rather than just a string of random communications.

Of the 8000 letters he has tracked down, Spotts includes about 600, which he arranges into sections that correspond to the central preoccupations of Woolf's life. The principle of unity upon which each section is based provides coherence and continuity, greatly helped by a few dozen letters that Spotts includes from some of Woolf's correspondents. To be able to hear the voices of his mother, his sister Bella, Lytton Strachey, Vanessa Bell, Virginia's doctor, even Freud, is immensely edifying. Letters from Lord Fisher of Lambeth, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, remind us that high officials were as dithering and dotty in the past as in the Reagan era and since. And there is a castigating letter from Woolf's brother Edgar that is an absolute shocker. Although Spotts includes all the extant letters of Leonard to Virginia, he does not reprint any of her replies, since they are all available in the six-volume edition of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*.

Far from being just the husband of Virginia Woolf, however, Leonard was a singular English presence during the first half of the twentieth century, although he never became a household name outside the intelligentsia. As a member of the Apostles during his student years at Cambridge, he was intimately connected with all of the people we now associate with Bloomsbury, from Maynard Keynes to the Stephen family. He spent more than six years as a colonial administrator in Ceylon, brilliantly effective but skeptical about colonialism. He gave up a career that would have led to high position by deciding to resign in the (well-founded) hope that Virginia Stephen would agree to marry him before he was scheduled to return to Ceylon at the end of his first leave. After writing two novels and some shorter fiction, he started the Hogarth Press at home in order to divert Virginia from the stresses that induced her periods of madness, an operation that eventually turned into a distinguished chapter in English publishing. Subsequently, as his own interests became more and more political, he juggled both a literary career as editor and reviewer with operations as political commentator and international strategist for public and private institutions that had great influence

<sup>1</sup> THE LETTERS OF LEONARD WOOLF, ed. by *Frederic Spotts*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. \$29.95.

on the formation of the League of Nations. As a result of all these varied interests and skills, Woolf came to know seemingly every eminent figure in the arts and government. By the time of his old age, he possessed the richest of reserves, ready to be mined for his five-volume autobiography, one of the most absorbing in all of English life-writing.

After the first group of letters, written mostly to Lytton Strachey during the Cambridge years and revealing a somewhat more unbuttoned personality than we have been used to from the published works, the letters from Ceylon to Strachey that occupy most of the book's second section reveal an ongoing alternation between elation and depression at the Ceylonese environment. Woolf speaks of the "monotony of perpetual work, the glaring and scorching heat of this place, the want of sleep, & the loathsome food which one has to eat here," as well as the evils of colonialism that counterbalanced the major social services the British were performing, a conflict that he delineates not just here but in his powerful novel *The Village in the Jungle* and the second volume, ~~Scrub~~ <sup>Scrub</sup> of his autobiography. As a can-do person, he had opportunities every day to feed his appetite for service, and by the time he was twenty-seven, he was made principally responsible for the operations of a thousand square miles and a hundred thousand people. While Woolf wrote from Ceylon about the life-and-death problems he was called upon to solve each day as he rose rapidly to positions of high authority, Strachey replied with gossiping accounts of his own amorous infatuations.

When his first (and only) leave from Ceylon took place, Woolf was faced with several momentous decisions that would determine the course of the rest of his life. As Spotts tells us:

His memoirs did not mention that these months were also a time of considerable torment. He found himself at the critical crossroad of his life. His professional record left no doubt that he would rise to the top of the Colonial Service and crown his career with a knighthood and governorship. Even if such honors meant little to him, he loved Ceylon and was genuinely attracted by the prospect of devoting the rest of his career to the welfare of that country. On the other hand, he realized there might be a possibility of satisfying a deeper longing—for love and marriage with someone he esteemed, Virginia Stephen.

His choice was to resign from his post and give up a career that would surely have exploited the multiple strengths and skills of his personality, but his talents would have been lost to the larger world.

With this decision, he set in train the events of a different kind of life, yet one which exploited perhaps even more of his versatility than would have been the case in Ceylon. "Beginning again" in London (to use the title of the third volume of his autobiography), he redirected

his energies immediately toward marriage and literature and eventually toward politics to a degree he had not quite foreseen. His letters to Virginia, which comprise most of Spotts's third group, reveal anew an emotional temperature rarely visible in his public writings. The love letters are passionate and effusive while his ardent ministrations as Virginia recuperated from a major breakdown soon after their marriage confirm our long-time sense of his almost uxorious devotion. "Only rest quietly and dont worry about anything in the world, & it wont be any time before we're again having the best life that any two people can have. And that is what you've given me from the moment you took me into your service." The remark about service, while a half-playful part of the babyish game between them, indicates at the same time his lifelong habit of putting his own personal and practical concerns second, even to the extent, as we learn from Spotts, of conveying no reproach to Virginia during her affair with Vita Sackville-West (a matter that he does not take up in his autobiography). This service extended not just to nursing Virginia and making her writing possible, however, but to a relatively ego-less bestowal of his faculties upon society at large, as his later career as a public person well illustrates. By the time of Virginia's recovery (which was never permanent), Leonard needed a recuperation of his own from the extreme strain and exhaustion of such a protracted period of attention to her needs, but while he was vacationing "the happiest moment of the day is when at ½ past 4 we come in from a walk & I see your letter lying on the table."

It was during these early years of his marriage that Woolf became a feminist activist through the auspices of Margaret Llewelyn Davies, a socialist and pacifist who was responsible for the immense growth of the Women's Co-operative Guild. Woolf traveled around the country to lecture to its members, mostly working class wives, about the inequities of women's wages, women's suffrage, and capitalist exploitation and he also, Spotts informs us, produced seven books about the cooperative movement in the process. This particular phase of his service to society can only reinforce one's sense of the almost pathological nature of some of today's attacks on Woolf by feminists who have trouble recognizing their allies in anyone who does not mouth their scripts verbatim. His connection with the women's movement also led to contact with Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the Fabian Society, and eventually to writing assignments that resulted in books like *International Government*. Despite the various spheres of Woolf's political commitment, including Fabian socialism, his skeptical mind prevented him from succumbing to the ideological fanaticism that is for so many activists virtually inescapable. Writing to Margaret Davies in 1920, he remarks, "I hope you dont think I'm anti-Bolshevik. I'm not. I think they're the only people who've made an honest and serious attempt to practice what I believe in. But I cant help seeing their faults & mistakes which, if persisted in, will undo the

good they've done. Perhaps however it's only the original sin of Governments."

Although too much has already been written about Virginia's death (including the fantastic charge that Leonard himself killed her), Spotts provides new information in the form of a note Woolf wrote at the time of Virginia's suicide in 1941 but which was discovered only after his death in 1969:

They said: "Come to tea and let us comfort you." But it's no good. One must be crucified on one's own private cross.

It is a strange fact that a terrible pain in the heart can be interrupted by a little pain in the fourth toe of the right foot.

I know that V. will not come across the garden from the lodge, & yet I look in that direction for her. I know that she is drowned & yet I listen for her to come in at the door. I know that it is the last page & and yet I turn it over. There is no limit to one's stupidity and selfishness.

The note is quintessential of Woolf's sensibility and integrity, of his minimal ego and his everyday perspective of experience as taking place against a backdrop of uncontrollable causal mechanisms in an impersonal universe. He managed somehow to combine strong-mindedness with impersonality, high ethical standards with humane responsiveness. If, philosophically speaking, nothing mattered because the universe *would* have its way, in practice everything mattered a lot. And the more we get to know him, the more we have to wonder: If *he* can serve as an object of attack upon "patriarchal values," where are the paragons of virtue who can afford to throw these stones? Would we prefer to be in *their* power rather than his?

Of the remaining sections of this volume, the letters about Woolf's operations for Hogarth Press, his transactions as editor for several journals, and his retrospective letters in old age are of compelling interest. When Bertrand Russell's wife reprimands Woolf for inviting "Bertie" but not herself to a book signing event, Leonard replies, "Dear Lady Russell, I really don't think that I deserve to be quite so magisterially lectured. I suppose that technically I ought to have said 'you and your wife'. But I was not giving, or going to, a party. I was doing what I had been asked to do, namely to take advantage of the snobbery of people who would pay for the signature of the author of *Principia Mathematica* in order to get money to rescue certain miserable Jews. . . . And I may add that I do not think any the better of my own wife or the worse of myself because as a matter of fact she was one of the people whose books I was asked to get signed, and I—an extraordinary fact—was not."

It is in the political section of this volume that Spotts summarizes Woolf's career as devoted to "service, not power" and sees this predisposition as a legacy of his Cambridge experience, with its

emphasis on philosophy and the ethics of G. E. Moore. In these letters, Woolf's pervasive fair-mindedness, his extraordinary ability to couple consideration of others with an almost blunt directness, can be seen yet again, most notably in a letter to Margaret Cole, apologizing for hurting her feelings in a harsh review of her book about Fabian socialism. Speaking of her "sneering and sniping" against the Webbs, which leaves "the uninformed reader with the impression that they were merely silly or negligible," he concludes, "They were certainly not that, and there was also another quality in them (the existence of which no one could guess from your description of them): a curious simplicity and sincerity, benignity and unvindictiveness, which made them, beneath their surface ridiculousness and infuriatingness, exceedingly nice persons. That is why, though they often annoyed me, I had a considerable affection for them—and still have."

The letters from Woolf's last years are too numerous and multifaceted to be illustrated adequately but the big surprise is his powerful emotional attachment to Trekkie Parsons, the wife of Ian Parsons (who was affiliated with Chatto & Windus for many years, the publishing firm that absorbed Hogarth Press). Although he had known them both from the thirties, this closer relationship with Trekkie began soon after Virginia's death and lasted until Leonard died in 1969. Writing her in 1943, Leonard observes, "You know, it's really rather awful to be as fond of anyone as I have become of you the last six months, dearest tiger. I suppose it's all right if you're 3 or 6 or 36 (though I doubt it) but it's disgraceful at 63." Spotts does not tell us, however, what role Ian Parsons played in this relationship, though there is nothing to suggest any friction or estrangement between the two men and Parsons, after all, later collaborated with George Spater to produce *A Marriage of True Minds*, a paean to the Woolfs.

Letters about Virginia's novels, replies to inquiries from the burgeoning Woolf industry, even answers to obscure religious crazies attacking Leonard for his secular mentality make this section a cornucopia of personal, literary, and period history, and the volume as a whole a fertile document of twentieth-century English culture. Although by now we have become used to letters, memoirs, and biographies making people seem nastier as we get to know them better, Leonard Woolf's periodic abrasions had never been a secret, while his virtues grow more apparent all the time. If some people can still find it profitable to cast him as a pariah, then so much the worse for them.