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*A magazine of literature and the arts*

HAROLD FROMM

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## Leonard Woolf and His Virgins

### I

If Leonard Woolf could be said to have a motto, it was not the "Thoroughly" imprinted under his father's emblem of a wolf's head; rather more appropriately it would be the reiterated theme of his autobiography: Nothing Matters. "In the end," he would say again and again, "nothing matters." This apparent insouciance, however, was the mask of a pessimism and fatalism that permeated not only his life but his writings as well. Of the Sinhalese natives among whom he lived during most of his seven years in Ceylon, he wrote, "When you get to know them, you find beneath the surface in almost everyone a profound melancholy and fatalism which I find beautiful and sympathetic—just as something like it permeates the scenery and characters of a Hardy novel." Both of his own novels, *The Village in the Jungle* and *The Wise Virgins*, are amplifications of this bleak purview: they show helpless but gifted protagonists self-deluded by an appearance of free will and control which, in fact, leads to disaster.

Woolf's apparent stoicism, as reflected by the refrain that nothing matters, was the product of a sensibility that cared too much, not too little. Early in his autobiography, he writes: "When I look into the depths of my own mind (or should one say soul?) one of the characteristics which seems to me deepest and most persistent is a kind of fatalistic and half-amused resignation. I never worry, because I am saved by the feeling that in the end nothing matters, and I can watch with amusement and detachment the cruel, often undeserved but expected, blows which fate rains upon me." But he also observes: "The moment at which officially I emerged from non-existence was the early morning of November 25th, 1880. . . . In the interval between 1880 and today I have lived my life on the assumption that sooner or later I shall pass by annihila-

tion into the same state of non-existence from which I suddenly emerged that winter morning in West Cromwell Road, Kensington, so many years ago. This passage from non-existence to non-existence seems to me a strange and, on the whole, an enjoyable experience." To a man who was capable of enjoying life amidst a universe honed for annihilation, the claim that nothing mattered was a form of whistling in the dark, an anodyne in the face of man's uncontrollable destiny. This psychological condition is adroitly characterized by Leon Edel in his *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions*: "Behind Leonard's will to live lay a love not only of life, but of the despair of life: an eternal melancholy—as of the wailing at the sacred wall in Jerusalem for the perishable things of this earth." And yet, Woolf's life, as opposed to his umbrageous philosophy, seems to have provided very little ground for such premonition of disaster. Like Milton's, every stage of it was good, its beginning, its middle, and its end. To measure a life against a purely putative yardstick of perfection is common but senseless, for a life can usefully be measured only against other actual lives, against human possibility, not against the fantasies of heart's desire. And when a realistic measure is used to gauge Woolf's life, every part of it can be seen to have been superior.

Born into a well-off middle class family with high standards and values; inheriting splendid genes; winning scholarships to England's best schools; obsessed by the handicaps of Jewishness while enjoying only the advantages; experiencing a remarkably successful career as a young civil servant in Ceylon; returning to England to marry Virginia Stephen and to have as his friends some of the most distinguished of British intelligentsia; having a marriage that was far happier than most people can reasonably expect in a post-religious age when, cosmically speaking, nothing really does matter; enjoying a productive life through both his wife's and his own substantial accomplishments; and living to an old age filled with the gratifications that come from retaining one's powers to the very end and making the most of them (his autobiography, written in his eighties, is already regarded as one of the masterpieces of British lifewriting)—having, doing and enjoying these things, he was sorely misled by a fatalism that may have

applied to the rest of the world but that certainly didn't apply to him. Everything finally mattered and everything was good.

That his wife had bouts of madness, that he was afflicted with a tremens, that he endured two great wars, that his wife ended her own life—in the context of human actuality these represented no unprecedented bad luck. All these things were the inscription of mortality, and most of mankind has seen much worse. Against the dark possibilities of ordinary human existence, Woolf's life shows up as an extraordinary success, an esthetic and moral triumph over the gods who may be dead but whose capacity for unleashing horror continues unabated.

Indeed, if there are any problems with Woolf's life, they would appear to be merely posthumous. Cynthia Ozick complains that he was insufficiently Jewish and that he dominated his wife; Elaine Showalter finds that Virginia was not womanly enough to suit her program and that Leonard has to share some of the blame; Roger Poole and Stephen Trombley believe that Virginia wasn't even mad and that Leonard's patriarchal Victorianism was responsible for his shipping her off to brutal doctors who were invested in the madness business; Phyllis Grosskurth darkly hints that Leonard had a hand in Virginia's death by drowning. Leonard, it seems, has become archvillain in a Foucaultian Power/Knowledge operetta. But his life was even better than he could have known, since he didn't live to see it taken apart and put back together again by people claiming to know how to live it better than he did.\*

Woolf's fatalism and its by-product, the protestation that nothing matters, are demonstrated with relentless and depressing intensity in his novels. Biographically speaking, this poses no problems with regard to *The Village in the Jungle*. The contrast, however, between the despairing conclusion of *The Wise Virgins* and his own life, upon which the novel draws to a considerable extent, has been a puzzle for many readers. Why, they would like to know, does the protagonist Harry Davis (the Leonard character) fail so dismally in his attempt to marry Camilla (the Virginia Stephen character) when

\* I discuss these uses and abuses of the Woolfs at length in "Recycled Lives: Portraits of the Woolfs as Sitting Ducks," in the summer 1985 *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Leonard was so brilliantly successful in achieving this coup in real life? It is a question, one must add, whose answer is central to the impact that can be produced by the sort of reading of *The Wise Virgins* that is willing to range beyond biography into literary terrain.

Woolf began to write *The Village in the Jungle* late in 1911, shortly after returning to London from several years in Ceylon as a major administrator for British colonialism, and the novel made its appearance in 1913. Although it is regarded as a classic in a number of specialized literary circles, it is hard to understand why such a compact masterpiece has not attained wider currency. The tale is extremely well drawn, the narrative voice masterfully controlled, the philosophical point of view provides a focus without authorial interference in the narration, and the drama is magnetically conducted to its fated catastrophe, which is really the fate of human life itself. Although the early pages insist on the cruelty and evil of the jungle, to an extent this characterization is belied by the narrative that ensues. The jungle and its creatures are presented both with sympathy and with a perception of their ecological beauty, while the human actors and the rigid, blind conventions that direct them are, in the final accounting, the real sources of evil and horror. For though the animals necessarily live in accord with their full capacities, man in society is a creature always capable, in potential if not in fact, of being other and better than he is. And so we feel less disgust at animals that kill for food than we feel at men who kill for money, sex, or power.

The village of the tale consists of only ten houses set off in a jungle clearing, with a small population of whom the principal are the hunter-farmer Silindu and his wife, their two daughters, and a recently acquired son-in-law (in role if not strictly in law). Their individualist behavior sets them apart from a collection of villagers who regard their eccentricities as the cause of miscellaneous public calamities, although this assumption has no factual basis. In social life, however, perceptions and beliefs are as good as facts, since they become facts and have the same consequences. Thus, the daughters are seen as threats because they have learned to hunt by accompanying their father on his outings; and the unofficial "mar-

riage" between the village headman's brother-in-law, Babun, and Silindu's older daughter involves a caste-difference that the villagers find unsavory. As for the younger daughter, they look upon *her* as positively unnatural when, having been forced into a marriage with the village doctor, she leaves him after their child is born and, to make matters worse, nurtures, even suckles, a young fawn that she finds in the jungle, as if she had produced *two* children. In one of the novel's most shocking scenes, the villagers stone the fawn to death and the daughter perishes soon after, having lost her will to live.

Silindu's older daughter is the next victim in a plot set into motion by a sleazy creditor named Fernando who craves sex as well as cash. When she rejects his advances he contrives with the help of the village headman to have both her husband and her father accused of theft. Babun, the husband, goes to jail while Silindu is acquitted, only to murder the false accusers in a rage of impotence and despair and a desire to protect his daughter from Fernando. While Silindu and his family have been picked off one by one as a consequence of the imperatives of their history—their fate, in other words—the novel draws to a close in a scene almost surreal in which Punchi Menika, Babun's loyal wife, is the family's sole survivor. In a collapsing house being pressed upon by the surrounding jungle, she realizes that she is about to be destroyed by a hungry animal.

The overriding emotion of this tale is the resigned helplessness of impoverished peasants in the face of uncontrollable forces. These forces, however, are products of social life rather than rays from the determining cosmos. The superstition of the villagers is hard to distinguish from socialization itself: it consists of an uncritical acceptance of social mores, a narrowly self-interested irrationality, a distrust of unconventionality. It has little to do with a jungle or with primitive society. Added to this are the insatiable desires for money, sex, and power which direct the behavior of the petty bureaucracy of local and regional chiefs. The cumulative force of all these lusts (the word's particular multivalence is exactly right here) produces the real operating fate that determines their sordid human destinies. The occasional introspective, questioning or

self-determining person who arises in this milieu—the very milieu of social life—is hardly in a position to thwart such irresistible powers, and more often than not his or her special gifts precipitate the catastrophe. If this network of forces is socially determined rather than god-begotten, we should not be surprised by the effects produced when we witness its action in Western suburbia, in Putney outside London, to be exact. The result is a somewhat more elaborately orchestrated replay called *The Wise Virgins*, as the genre shifts from sophisticated folk tale to tragicomic novel of manners in the suburban marriage-market circa 1912.

Leonard Woolf's own family home in Putney is the model for the Richstead of *The Wise Virgins*. Although his father's early death had precipitated a move from their more affluent Kensington home in London proper, the novel presents us with a Davis family consisting of both mother and father, a son Harry and a daughter Hetty. Harry and Hetty are certainly derived from Leonard and his sister Bella, but to claim that they *are* those very two would be even more inaccurate than to claim that Stephen Dedalus *is* James Joyce. While it is true that Leonard's mother was greatly offended at what she took to be a portrait of herself, and while George Spater and Ian Parsons report, in *A Marriage of True Minds*, that "Leonard's mother and his sister Bella are treated roughly," it seems more accurate to say that the novel's counterparts are not simulacra of the originals, which may be the reason why his relatives were so offended: they took the portraits to be more literal than they actually are. Spater and Parsons add, moreover, that "Leonard treats himself equally harshly."

The novel tells the story of the newly arrived Davis family, who are Jews, and the growing friendship with their neighbors, the Garlands, who are suburban Anglicans. We witness a short period in the life of the intellectual and rebellious Harry, who yearns to leave the suffocating philistinism of Richstead society and become a member of the Bloomsbury circle of Camilla Lawrence, derived, of course, from the family and friends of Leslie Stephen. As he falls more and more deeply in love with Camilla, he is increasingly frustrated by her lack of sexual interest in him. At the same time, he is carrying on an ambiguous guru-student relationship with young Gwen Garland, who is dazzled by his penetrating criticisms of

her mundane suburban existence. As their relationship becomes increasingly eroticized, they are driven to each other for sexual gratification, as a consequence of which Harry finds himself forced into a loveless marriage and the loss of Camilla Lawrence.

Surrounding *The Wise Virgins* are a host of problems and mysteries. Though one can only speculate about why Leonard Woolf began to write such a novel within a few months of his marriage to Virginia Stephen in 1912, the question is worth considering in view of the surprising fact that unlike their real life counterparts, Harry and Camilla do not get married at the end. That he wrote his second novel at this time may well be accounted for by his economic circumstances after resigning from the Ceylonese civil service in 1911 with the hope of marrying Virginia. But the psychological atmosphere that induced Leonard to write about his marriage at almost the same time it was taking place, and in such altered terms, has remained unclear. His failure to discuss *The Wise Virgins* in his autobiography, apart from a passing reference, suggests that the conflict it created with his family left a bitter taste in his mouth. He did not allow it to be reprinted after its 1914 appearance, nor was it published in America at all until 1979, under very different circumstances.

Thus, only a small body of critical response now exists, and most of it is unfavorable, though "platitudinous" might be a better word, since those who bother to attend to the novel at all keep making the same unsophisticated use of it as biographical source material. Spater and Parsons reflect the prevailing tone when they say, "Its interest today is in its portrayal of character, since the principal actors are Leonard and Virginia." (Though when Parsons writes by himself in his 1979 introduction to the novel, he is more enthusiastic.) Leon Edel treats it similarly in his book on Bloomsbury, while in an essay on *The Wise Virgins*, he dismisses the novel as "trivial" in a disappointingly inattentive reading of it as fiction. Even Selma Meyerowitz, in her full-length account of Woolf and his writings for Twayne, uses it mainly as biographical material, while grudgingly assenting to its "compelling development of the three main characters—Harry, Camilla, and Gwen—and some strikingly poetic description."

As biographical source, however, the novel is unreliable for

the very reason that it is fiction. Harry, for example, is so aggressive, cynical and moody, so much at odds with the received assessment of Leonard, that the attempt to reconcile the two either falsifies his character in life or tears the novel to shreds. The task of the critic, however, is to explain why the characters and events of the novel differ from their sources in real life—not to explain these differences away or, even worse, explain why they really are accurate representations of their sources when in fact they are not. A demonstration case of the absurdities that follow from these latter courses can be seen in Roger Poole's programmatic book on Virginia Woolf, in which he prefers not to discuss aspects of the novel that might undermine his political interest in throwing mudpies at Leonard.

When *The Wise Virgins* is examined as a novel, however, a new entity altogether confronts us. Instead of the bits and pieces of biography that heretofore dominated the scene, we become aware of a theme and point of view that hold all of this material together as fiction. Leon Edel threatened to open things up when he finally asked but did not correctly answer the question: Who *are* the wise virgins? To answer that question correctly would go a long way toward revealing the thematic glue that makes this work a coherent—and sometimes powerful—philosophic novel of manners, a compact Bildungsroman. After all, its contemporary relatives are Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. No busts of the gods would crash to the ground if Woolf's novel were acknowledged as their cousin.

## II

Right from the first page of *The Wise Virgins* analogies are made between the jungle life that Woolf had recently left and the civilized suburbia to which he returned, setting the tone for a view of life as predetermined by powerful and irrational forces beyond individual control. That Richstead seems unmenacing only serves to underscore the forces behind the unwitting traps that human beings set for themselves via culture internalized as vague desires.

The Garland family—a widowed mother and her four “vir-

gin" daughters—are getting to know their new neighbors, the Davises, who are just settling in. Harry is an artist, whose visits to art school serve the author as a pretext for acquainting him with Camilla Lawrence and her father, sister and friends, who distill much of the character and circumstances of Leslie, Virginia and Vanessa Stephen and their circle of Bloomsbury intellectuals. Harry, like a Proserpine commuting back and forth between the worlds of light and darkness, gradually makes his way into this Parnassian circle, the goal of his quest. But the task of the novel is to show how and why Richstead ordinariness—which he desperately hates—claims him in the end.

Although three of the Garland daughters seem merely peripheral, all four of them are indispensable to the working out of the novel's surprising web. Each exists in relation to the institution of marriage, Ethel and Janet as spinsters, May and Gwen as incarnations of nubility. Ethel, at 37, is universally regarded as a cheerful, pathetic and identity-less old maid, suited only to tea parties and volunteer work, now that life—in the form of a husband—has passed her by. Even to Harry's ruminating intelligence, Ethel is a puzzle. "What's she at? What does she think or feel? Is she satisfied with life, to go on like that year after year until she dies? She seems somehow to be cut off from all reality." On the other hand, when the two families dine together at a hotel, Harry is baffled "to notice that at dinner the only one to be really natural and comfortable was Ethel. She was not more talkative nor more silent than usual; always ready with her gentle smile. . . . in a silence infinitely more easy and reassuring than the rattle of Hetty's conversation. Her eyes never wandered, horribly fascinated by the forty eyes at the other tables; they never had to drop hastily or turn away flurried only to catch and drop before another pair of strange eyes; they were fixed in quiet abstraction—upon what?" On still another occasion when only Ethel appeared calm and natural, Harry thought to himself, "A foolish virgin." Ethel, it seems, is a dilemma.

Janet, somewhat younger, is both more and less of a puzzle.

She was one of those female "sports" born into so many families in the 'eighties. . . . She played golf perpetually, tried to drop her

g's, and dressed in pleasant, rough grey tweeds. Hanging like Mohammed's coffin between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, between the soft, subservient femininity of Victorian women and the new woman not yet fully born, she compromised with life by finding it only in the open air and on the golf links. Life in return had made her singularly pleasant to look at; [sports] had hardened her muscles so that even under the rough jacket and rough skirt, which always looked as if it might at any moment change into trousers, one realised that there were human limbs; her face was startlingly and provocatively sexless; the feminine sex of the hair and the delicate texture of the skin cancelled out the male sex of the shape and expression, which were those of a boy of eighteen.

After Harry meets her, he remarks to Gwen, "Janet? she's a dear. . . . One doesn't pity Janet, she's a *lusus naturae*, she's happy. She's ancient Greece, Hermaphrodite, the soul of a young man of twenty in a woman of thirty."

Although May is important for the novel, she is herself of little interest beyond her personification of middle class nubility. Destined to marry a boring and fatuous clergyman (who is perfectly in tune with the suburban environment scorned by Harry), she and her tiresome husband will doubtless be popular residents of Richstead, reflecting as they do the respectabilities of bourgeois society. For Harry, May and her marital longings represent the culturally determined ordinariness that he cannot abide and from which it is his principal occupation to escape, preferably to the society of the Lawrences in Bloomsbury.

Gwen, the last of the daughters, suffers from the self-dramatized immortal longings of late adolescence and finds in Harry's dour, cantankerous, and anti-social posturings the answer to her romantic prayers. She devours his knowing comments about their world, reads with perplexity the Dostoyevsky and Ibsen that he recommends, and begins to see her bourgeois family life as commonplace and boring. But underneath it all, she is a realist whose motivation is ultimately to succeed in a conventional suburban environment. For all her flirting with "liberation" and Harry's exotic program for life, the music to which she is dancing is the same Richstead serenade as her sister May's. Sex and marriage, not Ibsenist new womanhood, heads the hidden agenda—and it's not very hidden.

Harry is a surprisingly moody, brash, and even boorish young intellectual whose soul feeds on Continental literature, with Ibsen providing the serio-comic obbligato against which the plot is played out. Harry's alternations between stubborn silence and noisy fulmination against philistines, anti-Semites and suburban morality strike a sharp contrast with the Leonard Woolf of the autobiography, by then of course a venerable sage. But even Leonard's youthful letters to Lytton Strachey from Ceylon, among others, present us with a personality whose resemblance to Harry's is only *in potentiam*. Leonard indeed had elements of character that *could have* transformed him into a Harry under other circumstances, perhaps, but which erupted in force only on special occasions. Leonard's sister Bella confirms this view in Spater and Parsons' report that "she saw in Harry Davis all Leonard's 'less pleasant characteristics magnified to the nth power.'" She added (to Leonard), "If you had made—or would make—Harry really yourself you would make a fine thing of him." This assessment is particularly helpful in dealing with the problematic relation of Leonard to Harry—and autobiography to fiction—when reading *The Wise Virgins*.

Harry's obtrusive Jewishness, which is brandished at every inopportune moment, has been an insuperable stumbling block for many readers. Duncan Wilson, in his book on Woolf's political career, is one of the few who are calm enough about it to note that there is little sign of this Jewish unease in the autobiography, though Spater and Parsons do point out that Judaism had little real weight in his life. Although Woolf is always conscious of his Jewish roots and refers to them with an ambiguous satisfaction in the autobiography, he had little patience with religion in general or with folk sentimentality in particular. He connects the best qualities of his intellectual sensibility with Jewish tradition but at the same time he refuses to wear any mark of Cain, a speciality that he bestows on Harry instead.

Thus, Harry's obsession is all the more enigmatic. His constant anticipation of being treated as a scapegoat causes him to exhibit the very sort of baiting behavior most likely to elicit anti-Semitic retaliation. Yet even after such repeated ravings as "I'm a Jew, I tell you—I'm a Jew," or "We [Jews] wait hunched up, always ready and alert, for the moment to

spring on what is worthwhile," he is consistently well-received by the friends he cares about the most. Woolf's delineation of Harry, far from being a self-portrait, makes a certain kind of Jew look bad. And in this, his purpose seems at one with that of Philip Roth: to castigate, from an insider's privileged position, the moral deficiencies of his own people.

Although some readers' attempts to equate Leonard with Harry in this regard are grossly defective, there is another area in which such an equation can be fully supported: the novel's sexual intensity. Neither the autobiography, nor *The Village in the Jungle*, nor Quentin Bell's recollections of Leonard in his biography of Virginia Woolf offers anything to contradict this impression of Leonard as a highly sexualized being. Harry's libidinous restlessness, often reminding us of Stephen Dedalus, provides a pervasive tattoo throughout *The Wise Virgins*. When Harry calls to mind the ambiance of Camilla's presence we almost feel that we are somewhere in Joyce's *Portrait*: "He liked to recall the purity of her face and her voice; the remoteness of a virgin, he said to himself. When one knows the coarseness and tortuousness of one's own mind, the foulness and ignobleness of one's own thoughts, he used to think to himself, such purity of beauty is almost frightening. One longs to be intimate with it, but is there any point of contact?"

This contrast between the sensuality of Harry and the "purity" of Camilla is at first a serious obstacle in the way of Harry's otherwise intense pleasure from Camilla's wonderful imagination and intelligence. In conversation with Arthur Woodhouse, another member of the Bloomsbury circle (modelled after Clive Bell), Harry responds most feelingly to Arthur's frustration at Camilla's coldness. Arthur's outcry, "They don't realize that we've got bodies," perfectly expresses Harry's own suffering, a suffering that eventually leads him into his disastrous liaison with Gwen Garland. Camilla's letter of response to Harry, after his expression of love and proposal of marriage (a letter bearing more than a casual resemblance to Virginia's well-known reply to Leonard's marriage proposal), sets forth the polarities as *she* experienced them: "I want love, too, and I want freedom. I want children even. But I can't give myself; passion leaves me cold. . . . And then

there's so much in marriage from which I recoil. It seems to shut women up and out. I won't be tied by the pettiness and the conventionalities of life. There must be some way out." Although Harry is not yet aware of it, this is also his own view of marriage—a sexual trap—and his love for Camilla springs from an unconscious awareness that the core of their relationship would not burn out with the inevitable satiety of sexual desire. Marriage for sex frightens both of them, though sex in itself also frightens Camilla.

Given Harry's superior sense of security from the vulgar fates, it becomes the novel's central irony that something as commonplace as sexual desire should propel him into his involvement with Gwen Garland. And this central irony is doubly ironic, for Woolf's stand at the end of the Edwardian era was against sexual repression and hypocritical Victorian prudery. Both his narrator and his protagonist clearly speak for the author when they express, as frankly as conventions will allow, Harry's sexual needs. As Harry sees things, what "the male wants [is] a certain fierceness of love, mental and bodily." He notices the sensual leer on the face of the Vicar, Mr. Macausland, when he is examining his fiancée's appearance, and he knows that for all his celestially, underneath, the Vicar is "mere man." When the two try to settle on an appropriate place to hold the Garland-Davis picnic, the Vicar objects to one possibility (amusingly, named Maidenhead) because it is notorious for lovers behaving passionately in their rowboats. And inevitably, when the picnic does take place, Harry and Gwen behold in a passing boat a young man who "had his arm around the girl's neck, and her arm was around his. He was kissing her on the lips." Harry's comment to Gwen, "That's one of the things worth doing," becomes a portentous refrain. His ability to express such a thought reveals a frank acknowledgement of sensuality that was only then beginning to be seen again in English literature, after a long moratorium. Throughout *The Wise Virgins* this frankness prevails, first in Harry and then in Gwen's decision to flout middle class convention by giving her virginity for love. Nor are these sexual needs suffused with Shelleyan mists but treated, rather, as everyday animal promptings. Once they are seen as physical itches devoid of "romance," Harry's pow-