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# RECYCLED LIVES: PORTRAITS OF THE WOOLFS AS SITTING DUCKS

By HAROLD FROMM

**E**very 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