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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