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Harold Fromm
Leonard Woolf and His Virgins

David Robertson
The Book of Proverbs

Kermit Moyer
Tumbling—a story

Marcia B. Siegel
Kabuki for Beginners

Vernon Young
The Fine Art of Film Adaptation

POEMS BY Dana Gioia, Vinay Dharwadker,
Herbert Lomas, Alfred Dorn, Dennis Sampson

LETTERS FROM London and Paris

REVIEWS BY Marvin Mudrick, William H. Pritchard,
Michael Gorra, Robert McDowell, Liam Rector



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HAROLD FROMM

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