

LEONARD WOOLF, NOVELIST

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It would perhaps be fair to say that we have most of us got into the habit of thinking of Leonard Woolf as no more than Virginia Woolf's husband, the man who sheltered her from the more prosaic and dangerous aspects of the business of living, gave her everything (not to get much in return, some would argue), and thus made possible the unhindered flourishing of their literary genius. We tend to forget Leonard Woolf's own voluminous writing - not only his polemical political and social pieces, and his *Autobiography*, but also his two novels, *The Village in the Jungle* and *The Wise Virgins*. Yet they are well worth looking at, even if as no more than as a chapter of literary history rather than of literature itself.

The first novel is a not uninteresting story drawing on Leonard's exotic experience as a British colonial administrator before he married Virginia. But it is with the second evincing considerably more power and breadth of outlook, that these remarks are concerned with. Both books were published in 1914, when Virginia was still making final revisions in her own first novel, *The Voyage Out*. Leonard's *The Wise Virgins*¹ has a subtitle: *A Story of Words, Opinions and a Few Emotions*. This immediately evokes earlier literary periods, when such long-windedness was customary, and points forward to the verbosity of the *Autobiography*. The several volumes of the latter bear subtitles like *The Journey, not the arrival matters* where, besides the long-windedness, one hears echoes of the narrator as moral commentator. As to the novel, it

has hardly started, before another gust of Victorian wind, now represented by the sententiousness of the first sentence, blows in: "man is not naturally a gregarious animal though he has become so under the compulsion of circumstances and civilization " (p.1). A little further on there is a longer tirade, this time on marriage: "man is still a monogamous and solitary animal, jealous for the woman who has come to him, despite the clergyman and the gold ring, as she came to the cave, to be possessed by him and to possess him and to bear him children in the large brass bed " (p.2).

The reader cheers up a bit at the markedly humorous introduction to the story and to the characters. It is almost a parody of the conventional beginning: "It was June in the Garland's garden, a hot June afternoon. Mrs. Garland was not strictly a virgin, but she was a widow with four virgin daughters, and a widow of so many years' standing that she might almost have been said to have reached a second virginity " (p. 3) . This humorous tone, which never quite fails to be heard, partly redeems the novel from being what might seem to the contemporary reader a solemn tract belabouring the obvious.

After the introduction of the Garland household, there follows an argument among the girls as to whether or not one of them is wearing a skirt which allows too much leg to be seen. This, and the somewhat strained symbolism - the Garland's house is in St. Catherine's Avenue, and all the Garland girls cultivate lilies and roses - confirms that the novel has a lot to do with virginity, sexual repression, outdated conventions and the way in which they often clash with the needs of the spirit.

In fact, one might be tempted to consider this a "roman-à-têse," in the realist, almost naturalistic convention, the thesis being that the sexually repressed young animal will fall an easy

prey to the social trap of a meaningless marriage, thus betraying other equally compelling human needs.

The central male character, Harry - like Leonard, a passionate Jew - embodies the conflict between the flesh and the soul, the need to experiment and roam in the world of the spirit no less than in that of the senses, and the impossibility to conciliate the two in the still Victorian world of England at the turn of the century. An art student, Harry sets the world of the imagination far above the financial circle where his father moves. He professes to be bored by virgins (p. 26): he wants to show the Garland girls that "life was not all Richstead, virginity and vicars, needlework and teas " (p. 79). Still, he oscillates between the young women - especially Gwen, who is more than willing to let herself be educated by him - and the sophisticated circle of the Lawrences, where another virgin, Camilla, reigns.

Mrs. Garland, with her respectability and her concern with getting her daughters off her hands, belongs to a world which Camilla - a feminist like Virginia Woolf, who attributes female silliness to the lack of opportunity for a proper education - disdainfully calls "uneducated, purposeless, sterile " (p. 137). However, the nubile charm of the daughters, consciously or unconsciously used by the mother, cannot fail to appeal to Harry. His inclinations of course lie elsewhere, in Camilla's circle, whom he calls "epicures in the art of emotions, and in the emotions of art " (p. 80). Still he cannot but feel how much closer the Garland girls are to the natural affections than the brilliant Camilla, unreachable in her Athena-like coldness.

Not surprisingly, Harry adores Camilla, but, unable to get her, settles for Gwen, after spending a night with her: all the grim Victorian machinery - most notably inside the young man's

own conscience - points to the one inexorable solution, marriage.

At this point, the ironic note has long been superseded by an almost tragic one. As Harry has determined to marry Gwen, he gets what might have been a decisive note from Camilla - or is she still teasing him? Harry does not know. All he feels is that he has betrayed himself, and now has to pay the price: marry the already complacent Gwen, shut off from any real communion with him by the formalities of marriage, and give up his allegiance to the pursuit of beauty and to a deeper integrity than that of the ordinary social codes.

The reader knows better. Guided by a thousand hints at the need for less stupid sexual ethics, he has been led to see in society the real culprit - not in the passionate young man or in the shallow, well-meaning Garland brood.

With this outdated problem, the persona of the narrator mixes the discussion of other themes - snobbery, Jewishness and anti-semitism, feminism, the futile rebellion of youth against mercantilism and hypocrisy. All is convincingly done, as are some of the passionate or sordid scenes. Witness, for instance, Harry's meeting with the prostitute, just as he most passionately dreams of Camilla (pp. 146-47). At the other end of the scale, there are the comic scenes, the ironically sketched teas and charity parties, which provide welcome relief from the solemnity and didacticism of the less fortunate passages.

On the other hand, there is effective character portrayal, in the solid nineteenth century tradition. One cannot ignore the almost Dickensian figure of Mr. Macausland, for instance, who marries another of the Garland maidens: a pompous clergyman, who also happens to be a lady's man.

At certain moments, a faint modern note is struck. One here

thinks of Harry comparing a passionate moment with Gwen to a scene from an Ibsen play (p. 210). The similarity is there, except that the character's sensibility has outlived Ibsen: Harry manages to be both character and observer, to see the theatricality of his behavior, thus bordering on the ambiguousness and the elusiveness of the modern novelist's world.

Still, alas, what mainly keeps the reader's interest is the non-literary but fascinating possibility of the autobiographical connections. Camilla - and her double in the novel, the charmingly asexual Janet Garland, both echoes of the Shakespearian boy-heroine - may be really a portrait of the Virginia Woolf that Leonard had recently married: "she's ancient Greece, hermaphrodite, the soul of a young man of twenty in a woman of thirty..." (p. 72) "Though the hair and the delicate texture of the skin are feminine, she has a startlingly and provocatively sexless face..." (p. 11) "She wants to be desired like all of them. But what she really wants is to be a man " (p. 98). Like Virginia, what Camilla longs for is the voyage out, into the unknown. Camilla's words could have easily been put into Virginia's mouth: "I can't give myself. Passion leaves me cold. You'll think I'm asking for everything to be given me and to give nothing. Perhaps that's true " (p. 231). So also Virginia could have said "these passions and deep desires only cribbed and cabined one from the romance of life " (p. 161).

Trying to analyse the dead, one could easily think that this curious novel represents Leonard Woolf's attempt to come to terms with his own marriage. He seems to be telling himself how dreadful it would have been - and how easy - to have made a conventional marriage, to have escaped the difficulties of living with so unconventional a person as Virginia but at the price of boredom and insincerity. This unavoidable bundle of conjectures on the

reader's part would of course not brand *The Wise Virgins* as a dated, if well-structured and complex novel. What unfortunately marks it as such is the definitely Victorian claim to knowledge and to the possibility of getting to know the truth. Underlying the narrative, there is a feeling that the world is a bewildering place to live in, though, given luck and skill, one might still find one's way around. The narrator's persona does seem to be able to tell right from wrong, appearance from reality. In no moment is this seriously doubted, nor, unlike that of the modern novelist, does the discourse ever question itself.

As a consequence never does this otherwise interesting book become what the novel so compellingly proves to be in the hands of the great modern masters of fiction - among whom Virginia herself: a challenge to our way of seeing, a disturbing invitation for the reader to set aside vision-limiting conventions and take a fresh look at the world around. In order to do this, the narrator would have to renounce any hard-and-fast conclusions about the nature of life and reality. And this is exactly what the dogmatic Leonard, for all his attack on convention, is not able to do.

Note

¹ Leonard Woolf, *The Wise Virgins* (New York and London: Harcourt-Brace, 1979).