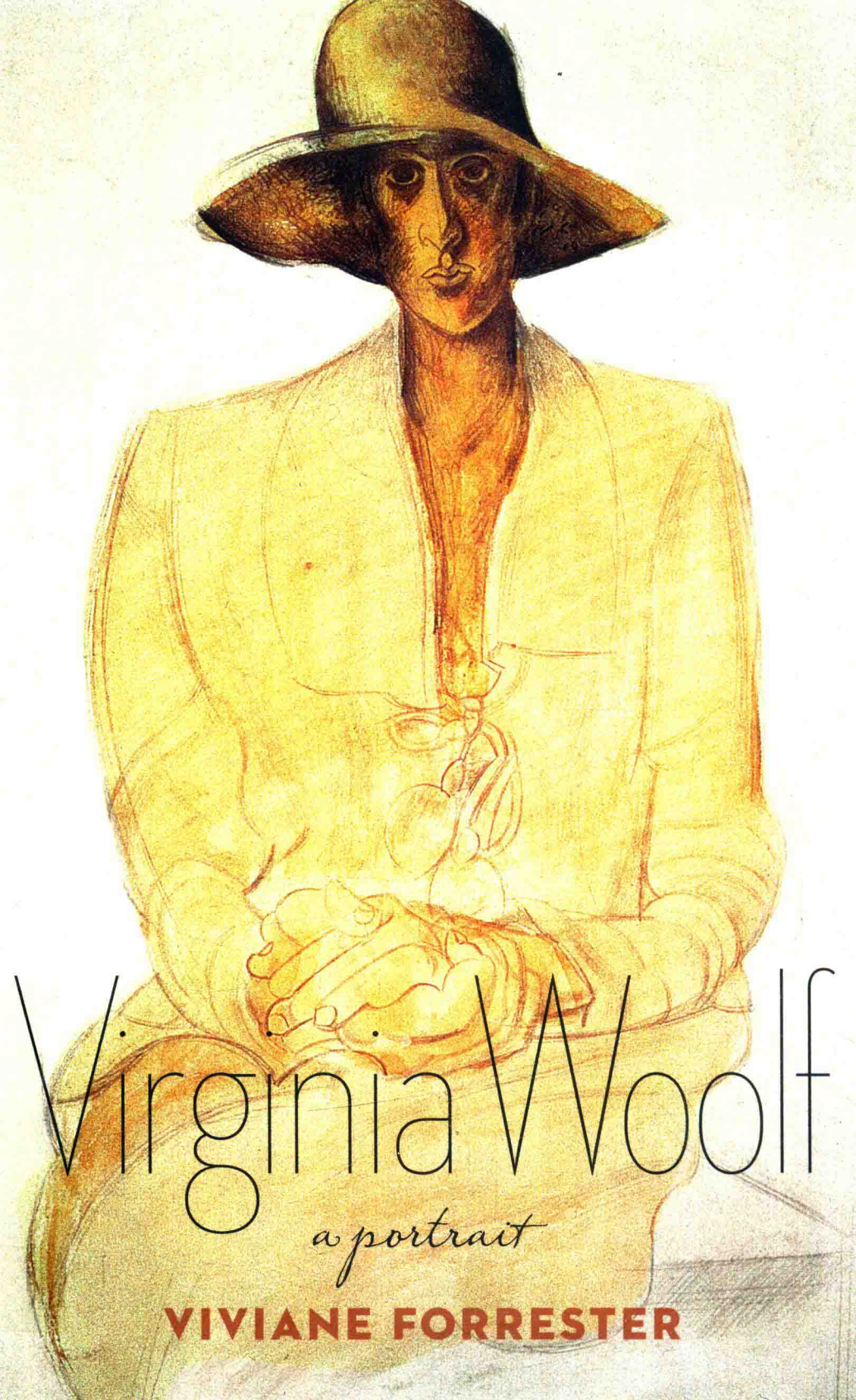
Virginia Woolf
a portrait
VIVIANE FORRESTER

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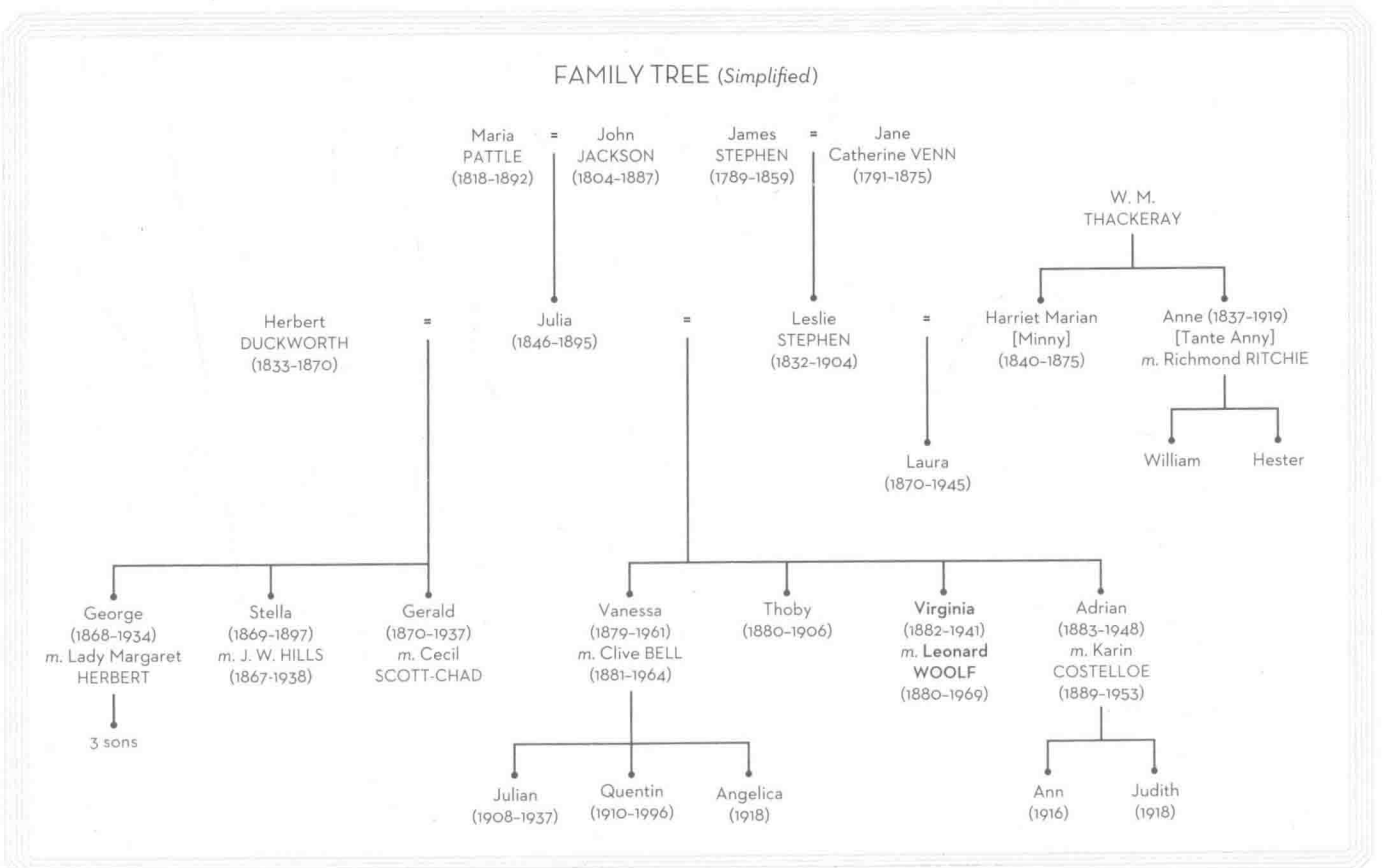
Virginia Woolf



CONTENTS

Part 1

HEARING the breath issuing from another body as it brushes against the skin: this can and does endlessly result from the pages brought to life by Virginia Woolf.

There she is. In these signs. Virginia, so distant from herself, as is each of us, but ever relentless in her attempt to assemble, to feel the scattered mobility, the multiplicity that constitutes her. Worried as well about responding to the "impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding."[1]

And endlessly failing in this, having failed, having admitted that "no, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known,"[2] having rejected such proof or knowledge and retained the uncertainty of achieving the exactitude beyond the silence that surrounds words, having above all and endlessly repeated her quest: this makes it all the more real, quivering with what she does not know but senses, trembling with what cannot be written down but what she knows how to indicate.

Here she is, passionate, ever watchful for what is always escaping, although she manages to capture its transience; here she is demanding, a little weary, impatient: "Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say, 'This is it'?"[3]

But can we say of her novels, which are so many live beings, her letters, her personal diaries that reveal her in all her states, sparkling or fragile, that make us convulse with laughter or tremble with emotion, that make us detest her too, can we say, "That's her"? Thousands of pages overflowing with thrills, gossip, angst, and so rich as well in detailed analysis of her battles with the text, exposing the very core of the science of writing, of being a writer—the very wound, the miracle, the disaster not only of being alive but also of becoming life's stunned, sensual, greedy, and desperate witness.

Around her, a constellation of men and women, of bodies, of destinies, all interwoven and, if fickle, also faithful to one another throughout, we discover. Telling their own stories, or each other's, most left their marks . . . which shape her. So many elements that more or less corroborate one another, each protagonist revealing himself, his circle, much more than he thinks. So many elements of which Virginia is usually unaware, whereas, of her own existence, she registers even the least tremor.

And thus the sensation of opening and, yes, of rummaging through drawers that even she does not know about, but also of living with her in the places, the homes, the landscapes that were hers; of knowing the climate accompanying each of her encounters and what impressions the hours of a day left in her; what impulses pushed her to the limits and to expand the limits, regardless of danger; what laughter enchanted her.

We do not know anyone, much less ourselves and those closest to us, as we are able to know her, not only her but also her circle and all the entangled lives, the secrets, the lies, the dramatic misunderstandings that ensued. Through those convolutions runs the work that cuts its way, that churns, unyielding. The body that perceives it.

But surrounding the woman who was the site for that work and who managed to shatter the frozen tongue, opening it to other languages? So many countertruths. She submits—entrusts?—to us so many clues about herself and the conflicts and accords, the quest and doubts that she comprised. So much information long kept secret was leaked by her circle through their memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and letters. Throughout the innumerable "moments of being" offered us, we will discover beings bearing little resemblance to the perceptions they had of one another and often of themselves, who often differ fundamentally from their well-known profiles.

Without Virginia knowing it, most of those closest to her, in particular, her father, sister, and especially her husband, differed sharply, and in

vital ways, from their reputations—which often still endure. In their own and in others' eyes, so many equivocations fixed them in roles that were not theirs but that they performed as such, creating serious misunderstandings that Virginia labored under, equivocal as well, deceived by the false appearances that are often still accepted, even confirmed, today.

Some examples? They abound throughout her life, surround her self-inflicted death. The death that Mrs. Dalloway called "an embrace."[4] Perhaps the only one possible for Virginia, all the more alone the more she was surrounded.

"How is one to live in such a world!" she exclaims at fifteen, before making Clarissa Dalloway, once again, say how "very, very dangerous" it is "to live even one day." But she has the answer: to become someone who could write, years later and shortly before her end, "I feel in my fingers the weight of every word."[5]

And that was the essential thing.

But was it?

What is the weight of a life?

What we absorb from a work born of the torments and delights experienced by another, thrown naked, raw, into the worst indecency, utterly entangling us: does it compensate for the exploration of loss that sometimes devastated, ravaged as much as intoxicated, that other—in our place and to our profit?

What entangled Virginia?

But, before launching into whole new aspects of her trajectory, one more remark: outside of any religion, Virginia recognized the point at which life itself (a fortiori the life of a human being) cannot be grasped, discerned, much less explained, and how reducing it to narration, to plots, an outline, or worse, conclusions, denies its very being—and how pinning it down to some configuration of conventional reality would destroy the shadow of its passage, its tenuous tie to a conventional reality.

Nevertheless, that is exactly the reality that she summons and interrogates in her novels, that she seizes in its immediacy, as though to better strip away its masks, extract its pulp, watch for its lapses, take it by surprise: the moment of a fleeting apparition of the present captured in its very disappearing.

The world as palimpsest, whose original text poets, painters, musicians, thinkers of all kinds struggle to perceive: it is at the level of appearances that this world subjugates Virginia. From the age of thirteen, with her

mother's death—then in an incestuous climate created primarily by her father, but also with the pattern of early, successive bereavements—yes, from childhood, the landmarks of the habitual, habitable, acknowledged world threatened to elude her, to lead her astray. She quickly perceived other directions, stemming from the loss of all direction, a universe exploding with other possibilities. To return to the everyday, to the commonplace, rational, predictable world, must have seemed as strange, tenuous, and dangerous to her as those chaotic terrains approaching distraction. Coming back to the banal must have seemed more unusual and enigmatic, more charged with magic than the exploding boundaries. And certain coherences more fantastic than chaos. Hence, her fascination for the mysterious effervescence of the moment in its plenitude, its fragility, in that reality, however trivial, briefly fused to the real, that represents, perhaps, dangerously, beauty. That substitutes for the divine: "there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."[6]

* * *

Actually, we are it. She was it. She expresses it throughout. But beginning where? Let us go back to the domain of the traditional account (truly, the most impossible), the story of one life lived among other lives, silhouetted against them, and let us find the distortion between what we know of her and what the images of her journey, in all its multiplicity, complications, entanglements, and enigma, seem to reveal.

The first example of such discrepancy? Well, the primary one that focuses on Leonard Woolf, that fascinating, passionate man who nevertheless had to and immediately learned to develop a shell, to construct for himself the persona behind which he hid the rest of his life. Strange, perhaps, this first choice, as Leonard only entered Virginia's life to marry her. He was thirty-one years old, she was thirty.

However, a quick glance backward to this man's youth (he was, among other things, an exceptional, if castrated, novelist), and we discover someone wholly other than the man we know, than the man he wanted to be recognized as: a Leonard who uses Virginia to better hide himself and who officially attributes to her his own troubles, his own vertigo in facing the risk of his own alienation. His own hells. If Virginia endlessly seeks her own identity, Leonard, perhaps more painfully, conceals his.

Behind the persona known to be austere, solid, supremely rational, regarded as a pillar—overshadowed by that being of strict reason and moral rectitude, rather cold but ever dynamic in his wisdom—appears another Leonard Woolf, fragile, neurasthenic, deeply despairing after having been mad with hope, and broken. A discouraged, ruined man, as he says, who struggles fiercely but without confidence in the mire of defeat that seems to him inescapable. A man he never ceased to be, who never left him even at the height of success, but whom he considered banished, whom he learned to repress throughout his life, with such vigilance, and such subdued violence as well! And so successfully! In the midst of devastation all around him, unconsciously or rather instinctively wrought.

To encounter this unexpected Leonard, passionate, vulnerable, mired in defeat, forever disappointed, and with suicidal tendencies, we only have to read his agonized, shattering letters, sent to Lytton Strachey from Ceylon. They attest to a past, the traces of which Leonard learned to blur, even if many documents remained. Just as he later learned to promote his own version of his wife's life, to frame Virginia's portrait so as to serve his own memory. Thus diverting attention from what could be self-revelatory, exposing him as he was.

Without convincing her of it, he made Virginia accept his view of her. But he was able to convince their circle. And even to convince posterity, thanks to the first well-documented biography of Virginia, not only authorized but ordered, practically dictated by him to his nephew Quentin Bell. Not actually dictated: it appeared, with much fanfare, in 1972; Leonard, who had died three years earlier, had only read the first chapters of this work, though he had been slowly, patiently weaving the material for it for decades, from the early days of his marriage to Virginia.

The most revealing aspect of this biography? Bell's condescending tone, speaking of his aunt while scotomizing the writer, whose work, as he was fond of admitting coyly, he did not know very well. Instinctive revenge (which we will find often) among Virginia's survivors, in this case, Vanessa, her sister and beloved rival, who was also Quentin's mother: to be able finally to dispose of Virginia Woolf, to summon her respectfully, officially discredit her, and disguise it as familiarity; to compare her indulgently, ironically (here good-naturedly) to the supposedly "normal" image she did not present. Separating the writer from the woman to avoid one and disparage the other. Above all, trivializing and ridiculing her alleged lapses with regard to the trivialities from which she stood apart. And thus,

inversely, marginalizing her with great authority. In short, putting her back (or rather putting her publicly) in what, it had always been hoped, was her place. And would partly remain so—once Leonard's fixed ideas, justifications, and conclusions were definitively sanctioned, ratified as legitimate.

She, a genius, and thus all the more eccentric and naïve, intermittently mad, always mentally fragile, a bit of a mythomaniac, and moreover, frigid. The timelessness, the power, the marvel of her work all becoming secondary.

And he, the backdrop, playing the serious, stable man, the protector, the husband sacrificed sexually to his wife's inhibitions, devoted to her salvation, watching over and enabling her work.

Quentin's account (that is, the inventory of all his uncle's theses and versions) has been debated, criticized, contradicted ever since—often brilliantly, movingly—but according to Leonard's obsessive vision. Even today, those who no longer accept this account remain dependent upon it, adopting it as their premise, either unconsciously or in order to contradict it.

There is a way to escape this stranglehold, one that leads less to knowing Leonard's life, already so well recorded, than to discovering *who* he was. *Whom* Virginia Stephen married. Virginia, whose childhood and then entire life we will explore only afterward, Virginia, battling so many errors, so much ignorance regarding those who surrounded her—living or (too early) dead.

Virginia, whose legend we will examine, the legend that holds her captive still and that Leonard instinctively wove, controlled, throughout their marriage; which was possible because he managed to forget and to make others forget the parts of him and his past that could expose his strategies, the explanations, the versions of their life, as it unfolded, that he provided. So many scenes in which he gave Virginia the same role, conforming to the rigid pattern in which his own role was to present an impassive front and make others and especially himself forget the wounded, vulnerable, offended Leonard Woolf.

So let us meet this forever overshadowed, clandestine Leonard. The one who, at twenty-three, despairs: "O le sale monde! O le sale monde!" Or, as a leitmotif: "The fetid, sordid world!" The one who wonders "why one doesn't commit suicide, except that one is dead & rotten," but who is also mad about literature, who asks of Henry James, "Did he invent us or we him?" and who rereads Madame Bovary, "the saddest & most beautiful book I had ever read . . . One day I shall sit down & read straight on to

the end: I don't think one would ever reach the end, I think one might die with Emma." The one who believes, hopes, knows himself to be a writer, and whose youth is misspent in exile, a civil servant in the colonies.[7]

A tormented, romantic Leonard, offended socially, close to defeat, resigned and bemoaning the hardships, the impasses, his ruined future. A Leonard whose true reasons, or rather, whose need for marrying Virginia Stephen we will discover.

His childhood? His adolescence? His father, Sydney Woolf, died at forty-nine years old, a successful, prosperous lawyer, his career already among the most brilliant, but as Leonard writes, "we had only recently struggled up . . . from the stratum of Jewish shopkeepers."[8] Leonard, born November 25, 1880, was then twelve years old, with eight brothers and sisters, and a mother who, much impoverished by her widowhood, would descend the social ladder but would manage to enroll her children in the most prestigious English universities. At Cambridge, Leonard spent the most fulfilling years of his life; he fascinated the other students, among them Thoby Stephen, Virginia's brother. There Woolf was elected "Apostle," thus becoming part of an envied elite, to which belonged, among others, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and E. M. Forster, as well as his professors, the philosophers Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore, and later Ludwig Wittgenstein.

He had found his niche. He lost it. And quickly.

His failure: "the crash has come &, by God, it is a crash. It came just an hour ago. I'm 65th!"on the final examination. Without financial resources, his only choice, he said, was to depart for the colonies or become a college usher. "A battered usher of 50, among filthy boys & people with whom he cannot talk, on 150 pounds a year when he wants 15,000? Good God, what a farce, for it might, I feel, so easily be true."[9]

It would be the colonies. Exile. Permission to return to England for one year out of six: "very yellow & silent—but I should be making 600 pounds a year! . . . This is a sordid letter, but I feel so." He is annoyed with himself for having written it, but his addressee, Lytton Strachey, protests: "Oh! No, no, no. Say what you feel at any & every moment. How could I bear anything else?"[10]

Soon after, on November 20, 1904, Lytton, whose homosexuality Leonard did not share, writes: "As I watched your ship in the Channel last night, I thought that all was lost. You have vanished and the kisses that I never gave you, and your embraces that I have felt—they are all that remains."[11]

Leonard had just embarked, equipped with ninety volumes of Voltaire's works. Responding to Lytton's protest would sustain him through six long years of trials: he would pour out his feelings without restraint to his friend in letters that show him tormented, demeaned, shattered in the midst of frantic activity; overwhelmed with work, garnering local successes and promotions, but lost, suffocating outside the circle of his Cambridge friends and struggling, often filled with impotent anger: "You think I shall be in a position to forgive God one day?"[12]

Cornered.

And why not stuck in this trap forever? To Lytton: "I feel that, in a way, you are lost to me already; you at any rate will be here, & there are other people, but I shall be rotting in Ceylon. I shall be out of date after 6 years." He knew nothing now but regret, longing, nostalgia: "It was always one of our supremacies—our poor dead blighted supremacies—that we could laugh. I think too I can remember them all; how we laughed [at Cambridge] for hours in that dingy old attic of mine & in the Goth's[13] green room & Turner's yellow barn, in your rooms & the cloisters & all over Richmond Park. I haven't laughed like that since Nov 19th though I was hysterical often on the Syria, & I suppose I shan't again for 6 years, when I expect I at any rate shall be dried up." The disorientation persists, the uprootedness, the sensation of a waking nightmare: "You *can't* exist, nor grey old Cambridge, nor Bob Trevy nor the Yen. I can't believe I have ever spoken to you, or rather I shouldn't if I did not want to so much now."[14]

The idea of a definitive return faded. Foundering, Leonard anticipated a life of constraints, engulfed in a destiny he abhorred. He envisioned himself incapable of ever escaping, suffocated by financial need, lacking qualifications, in a kind of social paralysis that isolated him where he loathed to be: "One thing you must understand & that is that I am done for as regards England. I shall live & die in these appalling countries now. If I come back for good now I should do nothing but loaf until I died of starvation. What else could I do? And as for happiness—I don't believe in being happy even in England."[15]

Throughout the six years he lived in Ceylon, his letters reflect him actively depressed, overwhelmed with discouragement. Three years before he returned to London on leave, Lytton suggested an escape to him: marry Virginia Stephen. Leonard, who was very close to Thoby Stephen at Cambridge, had only met his two sisters, Virginia and Vanessa, twice, over tea

and at a farewell dinner. He immediately latched onto the idea, but not without concluding: "To think of existence at all fills me with horror & sickness; the utter foulness, the stupid blind vindictive foulness of everything & of myself."[16]

This is the man, the man of Ceylon, who, returning to London three years later, would marry Virginia. And this is the man of Ceylon, as we know him, as none (except Lytton) knew him, who would forever claim ignorance regarding all notions of neurosis, neurasthenia, depression or melancholia, any personal thoughts of suicide.

But it is he, the socialist Jew, who in 1940 would propose that he and Virginia, also on Hitler's blacklist, should asphyxiate themselves if the Nazis landed. And it is he whose suicidal tendencies, melancholia, neurasthenia, and neurosis run as a leitmotif through the letters he wrote from Ceylon, confiding to Lytton: "I sometimes wonder whether I shall commit suicide before the six years are up & I can see you again; at this moment I feel as near as I have ever been. Depression is becoming, I believe, a mania with me, it sweeps upon & over me every eight or ten days, deeper each time. If you hear that I have died of sunstroke, you may be the only person to know that I have chosen that method of annihilation." And again: "Damn damn damn damn damn I took out my gun the other night, made my will & prepared to shoot myself. God knows why I didn't; merely I suppose the imbecility of weakness & the futility of ridiculous hopes. Whores & vulgar gramophones, fools & wrecked intellects. Why am I caged & penned & herded with these. I laugh when I read that San Francisco is wiped out & weep over the wreck & ruin of my existence."[17]

Strangely enough, that is where Leonard's strength resides: in the power of his tragic ardor, as later, in the energy, the endless energy required to keep from expressing it, to hold that ardor in check to ensure his decisive status, never again to find himself an outcast, forever to be respected above all (even if it meant being cowardly sometimes in order to maintain this; even if it meant feigning ignorance of the anti-Semitism to which he was often openly subjected, even among his close friends).

Only his correspondence with Strachey still tied him to the Apostles, to the life that was running its distant course among his friends. Lytton remains passionately faithful to him and finds his letters "Wonderful. . . . Why are you a man? We are females, nous autres, but your mind is singularly male."[18]

Lytton's writing is more brilliant, more spirited than Woolf's. He overflows with dynamism, ambition, humor, and beneath his light dandy-intellectual façade, he reveals a keen capacity for observation and lucid sensitivity toward his friends. A boundless enthusiasm—this was written in 1904, when he was twenty-four years old: "We are greater than our fathers; we are greater than Shelley; we are greater than the Eighteenth Century; we are greater than the Renaissance; we are greater than the Romans and the Greeks. What is hidden from us? We have mastered all. We have abolished religion, we have founded ethics, we have established philosophy, we have sown our strange illuminations in every province of thought, we have conquered art, we have liberated love."[19] Up until then, they had only good intentions!

Strachey's only difficulties come precisely from his love affairs, among them his rivalry with Maynard Keynes over the irresistible young painter Duncan Grant, before the latter became the lover of Adrian, the younger brother of Virginia. Who, in their eyes, was only the sister of her other brother, Thoby, so revered at Cambridge. "Oh but the Goth! Don't you see that if God had to justify the existence of the World it would be done if he could produce the Goth?" exclaims Lytton, who, less than a year after Leonard's departure, would have tea with "the Gothic at home" and this time would find Virginia "rather wonderful—quite witty, full of things to say, and absolutely out of rapport with reality."[20]

Lytton and Leonard had in common their desire to become and knowledge of being writers. Lytton was already imagining readers for their correspondence. And a publisher. Which also explains his flair. But it is Leonard who reveals himself to the fullest, as he is, hyperactive and broken. Devastated. Something died in him then, for good.

Although, if he considered himself a banished, mortified failure in Ceylon, foundering in dereliction, he held sway in the villages there, in the ever increasing regions that fell within his jurisdiction. People bowed down to him. There he dealt with, directed, judged men (natives) destabilized by a triumphant order that was foreign to them, managed by a civilization that was not their own.

Leonard slipped easily into the colonialist role. He was restive only with regard to his own fate, so different from his expectations, falling so far short of his hopes. It is true that the Empire was taken for granted at that time, that colonialism was everywhere accepted, even among those who tended, as he did, toward what would become the British Labour party.

Nearly sixty years later, in his autobiography, he would mention some qualms, a growing uneasiness he felt in Jaffna; a belated awareness of the imperialism that ruled and his own role in it as proconsul. His letters hardly mention it. Nor the reprimands of his superiors, however disinclined they were to condemn their administrators for applying too stringent measures with too zealous rigidity—as they would do themselves.

To be fair—and his first novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, testifies to this—he was dazzled by the landscape and moved by its inhabitants, whom he preferred to the unthinkable vulgarity of his colleagues. He learned Tamil and Sinhalese. Nonetheless, he was a White Man, civilized, triumphant, brutal: "The Arabs [!] will do anything if you hit them hard enough with a walking stick, an occupation in which I have been engaged for the most part of the last 3 days & nights."[21]

In each of his posts, he assumed multiple responsibilities: secretary, accountant, administrator, police officer, judge, tax collector, even veterinarian: didn't he inspect the herds? He inspected . . . everything everywhere in the ever vaster territories for which he was responsible. He endlessly made the rounds, grand tours in old vehicles, on horseback, on bicycle, grappling with malaria and other diseases; the insects swarmed, the climate was unbearable, his colleagues insipid. The work (an average of sixteen hours a day) became an antidote: "I work, God, how I work. I have reduced it to a method & exalted it to a mania."[22] That would be true, and could be the motto, for his whole life.

One of his responsibilities was to attend hangings; he even had to give the signal for them:

> I had to go (as Fiscal) to see four men hanged one morning. They were hanged two by two. I have a strong stomach but at best it is a horrible performance. I go to the cells & read over the warrant of execution & ask them whether they have anything to say. They nearly always say no. . . . I have (in Kandy) to stand on a sort of verandah where I can actually see the man hanged. The signal has to be given by me. The first two were hanged all right but they gave one of the second too big a drop or something went wrong. The man's head was practically torn from his body & there was a great jet of blood which went up about 3 or 4 feet high, covering the gallows & priest who stands praying on the steps. . . . I don't know why I have written all this to you except that whenever I stand waiting for the moment to give the signal,