

To Glide Silently Out of
One's Own Text:
Leonard Woolf and
"The Village in the Jungle"

JUDITH SCHERER HERZ

IN 1998, SHYAM Selvadurai, born in Columbo, Sri Lanka, but living in Canada for the previous fourteen years, published his second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*. It is set in Columbo in 1927, the year of the Donoughmore Constitutional Commission, the cautious and incomplete response of the presumptive father/mother country to the pressures for home rule in the island colony. The novel focuses on the encounter, years after they had been peremptorily parted in London, between the main character, Balendran, and his former lover, Richard, a British barrister, now come to Columbo as fact finder for the Commission. More than offering a simple framework or backdrop, the debate over the status of the colony is played out in Selvadurai's novel as a familial and generational conflict in a narrative of challenge to paternal rule. The claims of history, tradition, class, and gender underwrite the shifting relations of fathers/sons, mothers/daughters as both persons and polity look for ways to assert and reclaim an identity. If the main character has been made to lead a false life by his father, repressing, or mostly repressing, his homosexuality at his father's bidding, he is able at the novel's end to confront his father and to take back his life and yet still be *in* the family where he too is a father and a husband as well as a son.

After their first meeting, Richard reflects:

The memory of his earlier encounter with the Mudaliyar [Balendran's father] was one Richard never dwelt on, the excess of it, the humiliation. Yet seeing the Mudaliyar today had brought it all back.

When he returned to the room, Alli [Richard's present, much younger lover] was seated on the bed, his legs out in front of him, reading Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*. He looked up when Richard entered, but seeing the stiff look on Richard's face, he thought he was still in a bad temper and quickly returned to his book. (140)

I evoke this moment chiefly for its starring text, Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*. Why this book? What does its presence accomplish? It certainly fits the scene. That Alli, the young Mr. Alliston, should be reading the novel in 1927 is an accurate detail. Published in 1913, the first edition went through several reprintings in Britain with a second edition in 1925. If not a new book, it was now new again and by a known and respected public figure, especially one whose polemical and journalistic writing against imperialism would have been known to those involved with the Donoughmore Commission. This tourist might well pack it in his bags, even though the world it revealed would find little echo in his experience. For Selvadurai, moreover, seventy years later it is still a significant text, a way of specifying a time and a place and of writing himself into that time and place.

Indeed a striking fact about the literary history of this novel is its continued presence in the cultural repertoire of Sri Lankan writers both at home and the world over even while it remains largely absent from consideration by modernist and postcolonial critics.¹ Michael Ondaatje in his 1982 memoir, *Running in the Family*, uses a quotation as a section epigraph and then remarks some pages later, "Apart from Knox [a British sailor held captive by a Kandyan king in the seventeenth century and whose account, *An Historical Relation*, was used by Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*] and later Leonard Woolf in his novel, *A Village in the Jungle*, very few foreigners truly knew where they were" (83). His brother Christopher Ondaatje's 1993 memoir, *The Man-Eater of Punanai*, even more pervasively uses Woolf's novel as well as his autobiographical writing. In Sri Lanka the novel has rarely been out of print either in English, or in Sinhalese and Tamil translations. But in the Western academy there has been mainly silence.

Thus the question: how might one write Leonard Woolf back into literary history, especially his writing, both fiction and non-fiction, about the East? What kinds of claims can one make

about these texts — *The Village in the Jungle* (the chief concern of this essay), the three published stories, the second volume of his autobiography, *Growing*, his Official Diaries from the time he was AGA in the Hambantota district, Eastern Province of then Ceylon — especially claims that are not limited to what they reveal about Virginia Woolf and, to a lesser degree, about Bloomsbury as a social formation, but rather encounter Leonard Woolf as a writer in his own right? How did his experience as colonial administrator from late 1904 to 1911 and his Cambridge nourished ambitions to be a writer come into uneasy but fruitful collision in texts that in many ways determined the shape of his later polemical writing against empire? How is *The Village in the Jungle* different from and in some ways more remarkable than even Forster's *A Passage to India*, for example?

Michael Ondaatje's observation — "Apart from Leonard Woolf, very few foreigners truly knew where they were" — provides a suggestive way into this subject, for Woolf certainly knew where he was. Possibly not at the very beginning, a 24-year-old with dog and multiple volumes of Voltaire (70, 90 — the numbers change over the years), with a knowledge of contract bridge, a wonderfully watchful eye, a stern self control, an amazingly methodical and well stocked mind, and a trembling hand, setting out, still "an innocent imperialist" in the words of the last volume of his autobiography "rather absent mindedly to help govern the British empire" (J 193). Both the autobiographies and the letters he wrote at the time, especially those to his close friend Lytton Strachey, offer useful access to the fictional texts, especially when read with the caveat that they too are forms of fiction, the letters (mostly those for the first two or three years) the more extravagantly self-dramatizing. The autobiographies and the letters together provide two complementary and to a certain degree contradictory points of reference.

Not two months after his arrival, he laments in a letter to Strachey, that "well a thousand years ago I walked and talked with Gods" (*Letters* 74). And such Cambridge speech, as well as Moorean allusions to reality and the phenomenal, continue throughout the correspondence.² In 1906 he writes how his letter is "the last despairing cry of the ghost of a soul you once

knew in the real world" (116). Of course, more than half a century later, writing the second volume of his autobiography in some considerable measure out of these letters, but now inhabiting the persona of judge, ironist, and sage, he observes how when "one is writing to an intimate friend of one's youth, the passions and prejudices of youth which were so important a part of that friendship exaggerate and distort the picture of our reactions to entirely new circumstances" (G62). (And given Strachey's responses, which were rather ungod-like, racist really, one can understand something of the impulse behind this exaggeration). Yet even at the time of their writing he was aware of the degree to which the act of writing was itself the creator of the putative reality it described: "reality is nothing, it is only in writing & imagination that things are wonderful or horrible or supreme [the code words of apostolic friendship], in reality they are sometimes just beautiful, nearly always ugly & always vague & always dire" (*Letters* 146). The letters attempt to maintain, indeed to create in language, through writing, something which he acknowledged to have vanished almost immediately on his arriving in Ceylon: "the whole of my past life in London and Cambridge seemed suddenly to have vanished, to have faded away into unreality" (G23). An intellectual, a Jew, among the sport and gossip talking civil servants, all play acting, all "a good deal grander than we could have been at home" (G24), Woolf acted his way into the colonial world and there found himself watching both others and himself, "cynically amused, . . . playing a part in an exciting play on a brightly coloured stage" (G22). But if his fellow civil servants elicited his scorn and dismay, the country itself, its trees and soil, its sand and sun *and* its inhabitants elicited something very different. It is that difference that Ondaatje was referring to. Woolf knew where he was.

It is no doubt the case that the earnest, stern young man that the autobiographies construct was considerably less coherent a being than retrospect allowed. His anti-imperialism arose gradually and fitfully as he moved from Jaffna to Kandy and finally and crucially to Hambantota. But what began at once as his past life receded into unreality was a sense of personal solitude that allowed him an empathy with the world he found himself in

that was strikingly unsentimental and unpatronizing. "I am glad that I had for some years, in what is called the prime of life, experience of the slow-pulsing life of this most ancient type of civilization. [The word "civilization" is important. In his 1928 book, *Imperialism and Civilization*, for example, he argued that "what I regard as a clash of civilizations, they [the imperialists] regard as a clash of races" (21) with superior and inferior clearly marked]. I lived inside it to some extent, at any rate in Hambantota, and felt a curious sympathy with the people, born and bred to its slowness, austerity, harshness, so that something of its rhythm and tempo, . . . crept permanently into my heart and bones" (G32). The landscape, too, offered "the silence, the emptiness, the melancholia, and so the purging of the passions by complete solitude" (G27) that became a life long necessity. "I like my fellow human beings," he wrote toward the end of his life, "but I require considerable periods of absence from them, periods of silence and loneliness" (J150).

Summarizing his nearly three years at Hambantota, when at the age of twenty-seven he was put in charge of a 1000 square mile district of 100,000 people perhaps five of whom were Europeans, he wrote of his obsession with work and how he "fell in love with the country, the people and the way of life. . . . To understand the people and the way they lived in the villages of West Giruwa Pattu and the jungles of Magampattu became a passion with me. . . . I did not idealize or romanticize the people or the country; I just liked them aesthetically and humanly and socially. But I was ruthless — too ruthless, as I shall show — both to them and to myself" (G180). By the time he took up the position of Assistant Government Agent in Hambantota in 1908, his letter writing to Strachey had nearly ceased. There was little time or inclination for a theatre of the self; indeed in one of the few letters from this period, he talks of being happy, "the scene has changed here too and one changes inside too. . . . And I suppose I am happy too. . . . I work, God, how I work. I have reduced it to a method and exalted it to a mania" (*Letters* 137-38). The role he cast for himself in practice and then elaborated in his letters was that of the strict, obsessive, latent anti-imperialist who nonetheless carried out the edicts of

empire, indeed even exaggerating what he described as his “stern sahib attitude [this while still an Office Assistant in the highly Europeanized world of Kandy before the Hambantota posting] to compensate for or soothe a kind of social conscience which began to condemn and dislike the whole system,” (G157). Part of him enjoyed his “position and the flattery of being a great man and the father of the people.” But it was precisely the falsity, the bad faith, of that position that allowed him as he moved rapidly upward in the hierarchy of colonial administration to become “more and more ambivalent, politically schizophrenic, an anti-imperialist who enjoyed the fleshpots of imperialism, loved the subject peoples and their way of life, and knew from the inside how evil the system was beneath the surface for ordinary men and women” (G158).

In the last volume of his autobiography, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, written at the age of 88, a few months before his death, he reflected how he had come to spend so much of his life on political committees, on political, social, communal work, editing, writing reports, arbitrating disputes. He traced it to the experience in Ceylon; those years in the Civil Service “turned me from an aesthetic into a political animal. The social and economic squalor in which thousands of Sinhalese and Tamil villagers lived horrified me; I saw close at hand the evils of imperialism and foresaw some of the difficulties and dangers which its inevitable liquidation would cause” (J153). And was being just and truthful always being fair, he often wondered? “I was not,” he concluded at the end of this volume, at the end of his life, “prepared to spend my life doing justice to people who thought that my justice was injustice” (J208).

The Official Diaries that Woolf kept while AGA provide additional material for answering the questions: who is the writer and how might one read his novel?³ Beginning as early as 1808, keeping (and submitting) such a diary was required and Woolf’s consists of a mostly matter of fact account of his duties: investigating dams and schools, paddy fields and chenas, sitting as judge, acting as police magistrate, attempting to control the cattle disease, rinderpest, overseeing the salt harvest, keeping accounts, keeping order — all set against the constant backdrop

of droughts, floods, and the inevitable outcome of that cycle, malaria. And, of course, the human drama is closely tied to the natural cycle: can the salt carters be allowed to work if the rinderpest is not under control since a stray infected buffalo could come in contact with the carter's bulls with devastating consequences? Yet the carters cry poverty and the villagers are not willing to keep the buffalo closely penned or to kill all the diseased animals. How to adjudicate such conflicts? Over and over in the relatively impersonal, public voice of the diaries one hears the schizophrenia that Woolf later identified as the ongoing condition of his role and rule. The dispute over chena cultivation is the most striking example of this split self — wasteful in some ways (once the jungle was cleared for cultivation, the land yielded at best two crops and then remained barren scrub; those cleared areas are the chenas) but absolutely necessary for the villagers' survival in its yield of the staple crop, kurrakan, when drought prevented paddy cultivation. Woolf argued strenuously for revision of the policy that allowed very limited granting of chena permits for he foresaw the disappearance of the villages as a result, but as AGA he nonetheless enforced it. The consequences of that policy, the interests, self interests, and murderous entanglements of its enforcement shape the economic motor that drives the tragedy of *The Village in the Jungle*.

He did not begin writing the novel, however, until he had returned to England; he was too entirely *in* his life while in Ceylon to know it as text, and the few pieces he began while there, for example, a story fragment "The British Empire" and the complete (but never published) short story "Miss Gulbrason's Dog," are for the most part fictionalized extrapolations of his encounters with his fellow colonials.⁴ The Perkins of the first story seems to be Dutton with whom Woolf shared a bungalow for a period in Jaffna, and Miss Gulbrason of the second is a fairly mean spirited sketch of a missionary lady, Annie Hopfengartner, who fell in love with Woolf and whose many letters to him still sit forlornly in the University of Sussex archives. But once back in London wondering where he would pass the rest of his life, wondering if he would indeed go back to Ceylon for he was only on home leave (he did not officially resign for

another year), the act of fiction making allowed him to make sense of his decision not to return. He wrote the novel during his courtship of Virginia and possibly during the early months of their marriage as well, Virginia in another room writing *The Voyage Out*,⁵ but had Leonard Woolf at this critical juncture not successfully completed the voyage in, he would indeed have returned to Ceylon, to "a final withdrawal, a final solitude" (G 247). For in the writing of that novel, he "tried" as he described the process in *Beginning Again* "somehow or other vicariously to live their lives" (B47), that is, the lives of the Sinhalese villagers, but at the same time as he was attempting this, he was aware that were he to return it would not be to this village world but rather to the "dreary pomp and circumstance of imperial government" in the Europeanized world of Columbo. In a very literal sense, Woolf wrote himself out of empire. "The more I wrote *The Village in the Jungle*, the more distasteful became the prospect of success in Columbo" (B48). The novel's analysis of imperialism is grounded in the process of its repudiation.

However, rather than summarize the novel, I will offer an overview that highlights several critical issues. Within the village of Beddagama (the name means village in the jungle in Sinhala), in the southeastern portion of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, power is maintained by a rigid system of the obligations of debt and their perpetuation. Debt occurs because of the buying of permits, permits matter because the British have decreed (as good environmentalists with memories of their green and pleasant land) that only a limited amount of jungle can be cleared for cultivation; and permits can only be purchased for clearing these chenas against the crops that have yet to be planted or harvested, so debt always increases. The imperial surrogate, the pliant and devious village headman, profits and schemes. Silindu, lazy (as cultivator, not as hunter), is always in debt and deeper in debt. And since he is a bit strange and his daughters are somewhat wild (in the sense that they seem to have affinities more with the animals of their father's jungle watchings than with the ways of the village) he is, if this were a Greek tragedy, one who is doomed by the gods, as are they.

The plot turns on the marriages of his daughters, one for love, the other for filial duty to cure her ailing father, both marriages equally doomed. Debt, greed, and western justice see to that. For to the degree that there is any western presence at all in this text, it occurs in the courtroom scenes. There the magistrate knows that somehow the evidence does not quite add up, but there is no counter evidence, no counter discourse. Silindu is silent, uncomprehending; he does not know how to testify to his son-in-law Babun's innocence, let alone to the machinations of the headman and his ally to contrive the appearance of a crime. And so the magistrate reluctantly and yet complicitly pronounces Babun's guilt. And now Silindu does kill. He cunningly tracks the headman who had always been — but Silindu had not been able to see it until the moment of Babun's conviction — his implacable enemy and kills him. The plot spirals rapidly down from there. Babun dies in prison and Silindu, who by then hopes to die, has his sentence commuted to twenty years, a sentence worse than death. The village begins to disappear, reduced now to "the bare compound and the parched jungle . . . [which] surged forward over and blotted out the village up to the very walls" of his daughter's hut. "The village was forgotten, it disappeared into the jungle from which it had sprung. . . . [Punchi Menika] had returned to the jungle; it had taken her back; she lived as she had done, understanding it, loving it, fearing it" (177-78). And that fear is her last response, for as she lay dying, "a great black shadow glided into the doorway. Two little eyes twinkled at her steadily, two immense white tusks curled up gleaming against the darkness. . . . Fear came upon her, blind agonizing fear. . . . As she fell back, the great boar grunted softly, and glided like a shadow towards her into the hut" (179).

The Village in the Jungle enters into the world it conjures up as if the West and the entire metaphysical-cum-realist tradition of fiction never happened. And in this it is unlike any other colonial text. It enters into this other world, other life, other consciousness, leaving no trace, or so faint a trace as to be less than no trace, of the subject position of the writer. But the voice that remains is not that of a faux naïf. This is no douanier Rousseau

lurking in the lush underbrush of the imagination. The leopard and boar that glide from the jungle darkness are all too real. And they are not cousin to Mowgli's brothers either. Granted that, occasionally, *The Village in the Jungle* strikes the Kipling note of *The Jungle Books*, but it does so only when Silindu is telling jungle tales. These inset narratives have the status of folklore, of another language, inside the text. Interestingly, in the 1970s, Woolf's story "The Two Brahmins" (1921), its materials certainly drawn from his close attention to the villagers' telling of tales, reappeared in a new volume of Sri Lankan folk tales (Ratnatunga 91-95). The story there was somewhat shorter than Woolf's but in large measure identical, although no mention of this was made by the editor. The story seemed to have returned to its place of origin as if it were a native son, Woolf's fiction now Sri Lankan folklore. These inset narratives mark Silindu, the still and uncomprehending centre around which both plot and discourse turn, as the character who is entirely outside the range of western speech. He is in the jungle, of the jungle, but there is no romance or whimsy in this dangerous, impoverished place. "It was . . . a world of bare and brutal facts . . . of hunger and fear . . . of watchings by the water holes at night, . . . of the animals and devils which lived among its shadows" (15). However frightening, this world is still more explicable than the human world. "Animals have their seasons," the narrator comments, speaking from within the jungle, "man alone is perpetually dominated by his desires" (42).

The poverty of those villages in the jungle was exacerbated by the sometimes self serving, sometimes merely stupid imperial institution that sent Woolf to be its administrator, and, in the event, its witness and engaged opponent for the next half century. The jungle may mark the site of evil (the phrase is almost a refrain in the novel and in the memoirs of the Ondaatjes too), but it marks it as a surrogate for the far greater evil of the social structures and economic imperatives that destroy the village and allow the jungle to encroach at the last: "Punchi Menika was dying, and the jungle knew it; it is always waiting; can scarcely wait for death" (179). Kipling's jungle, by contrast, is a stage set and his animals chat like precocious children, somewhat arch,

slightly sly. The Mowgli character himself speaks the language of the man he will grow into — “but that is a story for grown ups,” the Kipling narrator comments (*Jungle*, 135) — as well as the nearly identical language of the wolf pack. And while the other characters in Woolf’s novel speak a slightly foreign language, it is by no means a childish or reduced prose. Indeed, in Sri Lanka it has often been remarked how close to the rhythms, syntax and sound of Sinhalese was the English of the text.

Who speaks this tale? Where is he in the text? And why/how does it matter? These questions have been posed before usually in terms that suggest that the claimed narratorial neutrality is really an act of appropriation if not outright possession. For example, in Douglas Kerr’s account, the novel “exercis[es] over its representations of native life a more complete discourse authority than the most missionary of colonial powers ever aspired to”; it stages “a compensatory fantasy of omniscience” (273, 270).⁶ Certainly in some obvious sense the narrator is omniscient, but it is a curiously split and subject-less omniscience, obscured by the world it peers into, helpless rather than authoritative. Considering how multiply narrated Woolf’s rather Conradian short fictions are, both “A Tale Told by Moonlight” and the amazingly olfactory “Pearls and Swine,” the disappearance of the narrator after the first paragraph of the novel (that’s the only place in which “I” occurs) is worth noting. A “you” is addressed a few times in that first chapter, but never afterwards. This “you,” however, is an assumed auditor *in* the story, a villager, for example, and not a western reader.

What complicates this, however, is that as the narrator disappears into the jungle shadows, somewhere miles and oceans away an ethnographer is taking notes, explaining local customs and terms, sometimes in footnotes, sometimes even in narration, although in the latter case the process of explanation is mostly naturalized both syntactically and thematically. The ethnographer may be Leonard Woolf or one of his avatars (in this case the former AGA who ruled his province with utter efficiency and with a kind of ruthless compassion, carefully detailed in his Official Diaries, even as the imperial scales were falling from his eyes), but the narrator *in* the text rarely has such a specific

identity. His narration and the characters' speech are often indistinguishable. In a passage near the end, Punchi Menika has come to the prison to find her husband Babun but she has no money to bribe the guard:

"What has happened to him? I have come many days journey to ask about him, and now you send me away to more trouble."

The jail guard looked at Punchi Menika for a minute or two.

"Well," he said, "charity they say is like rain to a parched crop. You are asking for drought in a parched field. I knew the man; he was here, but he is dead. He died two months back."

The jail guard expected to hear the shrill cry and the beating of the breast, the signs of a woman's mourning. Punchi Menika astonished him by walking slowly away to the shade, and sitting down again by the prison wall. The blow was too heavy for the conventional signs of grief. She sat dry-eyed; she felt little, but the intense desire to get away to the village, to get away out of this world, where she was lost and alone, to the compound where she could sit and watch the sun set behind the jungle. She did not wait long; she set out at once down the hill. The old man still sat among his cows looking at the coconut-trees. [Years before the old man had made a similar journey]

"Ah," he said, as she passed him, "they never come out. I told you so."

"He is dead, father."

"Yes, they never come out, go back to the village, child."

"I am going, father." (175)

Here the narrator seems helpless rather than all powerful, telling the tale despite himself. He sets the scene, places the characters but can do nothing for them. The writer might want the narrator to know more, to do more, but like the magistrate he can at best avert his eyes. Less "compensatory fantasy" than mute testimony, the act of narration in *The Village in the Jungle* is far more ambiguous and unsettling than theories of appropriation would allow.⁷

In one of his early letters from Ceylon, Woolf wrote of "glid[ing] silently even out of one's own life" (*Letters* 135). That would do well as a description of the novel's narrator who glides silently even out of his own text. An omitted paragraph is interesting witness to this. It reads in part: "I said at the beginning of this story that it is very difficult to understand the minds of the villagers. But it is also very difficult to describe their workings

even if one does understand them. This is because they do not think about what they think; they scarcely realize themselves what is passing in their minds."⁸ But still, he goes on to suggest, one can represent their interiority, their view of life, in words that are their words even if they don't utter them. This is certainly a foolhardy assertion with its claim to a kind of paternal knowingness, but, in the event, that superior voice is silenced. In fact, the narrator accomplishes this representation precisely because he suppresses such markers of a putative superior understanding in the published text. The omission of this passage was a move something akin to Forster's willing his "writing mind . . . to remain a blur" about what happened in the Marabar Caves.⁹ The result there was the replacement of what was an entirely trivial scene by one of the most remarkable and difficult moments in twentieth century fiction and thus completely transforming what might otherwise have been perilously close to a pot boiler (did Aziz do *that?*). The result of suppressing that early passage in *The Village in the Jungle* is a text that almost seems to be happening outside the narrator's earshot, certainly outside his power to influence or control. It becomes, remarkably, a witness text by the voiceless.

One might also note here a curious silence in literary history, for there is very little discussion of the relation of Forster's novel to Woolf's, although Woolf's crucial push, his timely encouragement are often recounted when Forster's writing difficulties with his own novel are discussed. In fact, Forster read *The Village in the Jungle* before leaving for his first trip to India, and, I would suggest, had Woolf's opening description of village and jungle somewhere in the echo chamber of his memory when he began his novel with the memorable description of Chandrapore. In both texts the novelistic space is entered at a distance, from above, a wide view gradually narrowing and then focussed on the particular, on mud and dust. The Marabar Hills and the city are set in something of the jungle/village opposition of Woolf's text. In both there is a pervasive sense of instability, of threat. The crucial difference, however, is that the Woolf narrator disappears into this space, while Forster's maintains a certain distance, interrogating his (mostly English) characters, knowing

them, possibly too well. Without going down the rabbit hole of the debate about the implications of Forster's intimation that the vast landscape and the echoing, meaning-negating cave are necessarily unknowable for his *own* soul's sake, one can simply observe that Woolf's fiction makes no such move. The village world, the jungle landscape are their own space. They stand for nothing else. In *The Village in the Jungle*, the Western presence is only there at the margins. It is something alien, terrifying to the villagers, and once it joins forces with the jungle, such life as is there is erased. The novel overturns the familiar orientalist trope. Here it is not the East that is unknowable, impossible to read, reducing all meaning to "ou boum"; rather the reverse.

The Village in the Jungle is a profoundly anti-imperialist text, grounded in the conviction that becomes more and more explicit in Woolf's subsequent writing of "the absurdity of a people of one civilization and mode of life trying to impose its rule upon a people of an entirely different civilization and mode of life" ("The Colour" 6). It was the first of an important sequence of Woolf texts written over the next half century, all well worth further investigation: *Empire and Commerce in Africa*; *Fear and Politics: A Debate at the Zoo* (anticipating Orwell's *Animal Farm* by several decades); *Imperialism and Civilization*; *Quack, Quack*; *Barbarians at the Gates*; extensive journalism, reports and memoranda for the Labour Party and, of course, the five volumes of his autobiography. From the time of his return from Ceylon, he was actively engaged in politics, including activities on behalf of Ceylon to get Britain to suspend martial law imposed after the riots of 1914-15. This continued in the post war years; in a 1938 Memorandum to the Labour Party, he argued for a federal form of government, something akin to the Swiss canton model as a safeguard for the Tamil minority in the North and East. The Tamils had good reason to question the move toward independence, fearful, as one of the members of the Tamil elite in Selvadurai's novel argues, that change would merely mean replacing the British Raj by a Sinhala Raj. There is often, that novel cautions, no simple either/or in families or in nations. Something similar to Woolf's proposal was indeed adopted about 50 years later, but too little too late is possibly the best

that might be said of the arrangement as decades of civil war attest.

I began in Canada and I will end there. Christopher Ondaatje's *The Man-Eater of Punanai* is an account of a 1990 journey to his Sri Lankan boyhood home, to his dead father, to his family's past life, and most resonantly to the leopard in the jungle, a figure that is at once beast and man. Leopard, father, insurgent, and soldier meet, merge, and part, the writer in pursuit and sometimes pursued. Violence is always there — religious, linguistic, communal — with factions and counter factions on every side. It is a remarkable text, not as writerly or imaginatively evocative as his brother's many layered *Running in the Family*, which, in its re-creation of Columbo Tamil society of the 1920s, the world of the Ondaatje parents and grand parents, is closer to Selvadurai's novel (in some ways the world of *The Man Eater* is politically closer to Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*), but it is, nonetheless, an intricate interweaving of the political and the personal. Its whole outlook, moreover, its depiction of human nature and the natural world, is remarkably close to both *The Village in the Jungle* and the autobiographical volume *Growing*. Often Christopher Ondaatje seems to be Woolf *redivivus*; both men are of the world, who like to manage, to keep scrupulous accounts, to be in charge. Ondaatje uses Woolf directly as text to quote and cite, as source of information and, most interestingly, as an echo of his own responses.

It is in Hambantota where Christopher Ondaatje feels Woolf's presence most directly. He is on the beach listening to the sound of the waves, "How often had I gone to sleep to that sound! I had never forgotten it in England or in Canada, and I was astonished to read in Leonard Woolf's *Growing* that it had made the same impression on him," and he quotes a passage from Woolf that concludes, "that moment of complete silence followed by the great thud, the thunder of the wave upon the shore became part of the rhythm of my life" (*Man-Eater* 51). Ondaatje tracks the leopard in the same Yala jungle that Woolf had, using Woolf's account as a reference point, as well as linking his adventures to Woolf's through some of the same characters. Most striking, however, is the way both understand the human in terms of the

animal. After leaving Yala and before setting out on the last leopard trek northward to Punanai, Ondaatje visits a quaint old couple living in a colonial house full of Sri Lankan relics and antiques — and hears their reaction to the murder of a lawyer acquaintance. “He had it coming,” they explained “because he had been engaged in dubious political activities.” Ondaatje concludes: “I was back among mankind, its laws and its savagery, and I was already starting to miss the open spaces, the silent hours, and the natural ways of birds and beasts (110).” I think it would be impossible to know without already knowing whether it was Woolf or Ondaatje who wrote those words.

Last words, however, go to Michael Ondaatje in his account in *Running in the Family* of an incident in which his drunken and obsessed father, an officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry, certain that a Japanese invasion was imminent (the year is 1943), takes over a train and shunts it back and forth to prevent its arriving at the Columbo station. One car contains high ranking British Officers:

Everyone felt that the anarchic events should be kept from sleeping foreigners. The English thought that Ceylon trains were bad enough, and if they discovered that officers in the Ceylon Light Infantry were going berserk and upsetting schedules they might leave the country in disgust. Therefore, if anyone wished to reach the end of the train, they would climb onto the roof of the “English carriage” and tiptoe, silhouetted by the moon above them, to the next compartment. My father, too, whenever he needed to speak with the driver, climbed out into the night and strolled over the train, clutching a bottle and revolver and greeting fellow passengers in hushed tones who were coming the other way. Fellow officers who were trying to subdue him would never have considered waking up the English. They slept on serenely with their rage for order in the tropics, while the train shunted and reversed into the night. (154)

This image of the sleeping English and their rage for order while Ceylon carries on over them, around them, invisible to them, inaudible to them, shunted backwards and forwards in the dark, strikes me as a serendipitous emblem for the encounter and its multiple transformations that I have been tracing here on that tear drop shaped island in the Indian Ocean. Serendip was the ancient name of Sri Lanka.

NOTES

- 1 There are some exceptions. There is S. P. Rosenbaum's account of Woolf's writing in *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, a scholarly edition of *The Village in the Jungle* is being prepared. Natania Rosenfeld considers the novel and the stories in her book about both Woolfs, *Outsiders Together*, and there have been a few recent journal essays. In two of these, Anindyo Roy probes the crisis of representation in the stories, their "questioning of the legitimacy of narrative authority," in the context of Bloomsbury's lack of understanding of the fiction's undercurrents and Woolf's "troubled relationship with his own class defined metropolitanism" ("Telling" 190, 193). A few years earlier, Douglas Kerr used discourse analysis to examine the genres of Woolf's colonial writing, their representation of different but equally "real" Woolfs. See also essays by Elleke Boehmer and Yuko Ito. Several essays in the 1970s and 1980s opened discussion of Woolf's novel, notably those of Yasmine Gooneratne, Gillian Workman, Stephen Medcalf, and L. L. Lee. These references plus some pages in passing in a few books pretty much sum up three decades of critical attention. On the other hand, I have yet to meet a Sri Lankan, young or old, who has not read *The Village in the Jungle* (and I ask each time).
- 2 The Cambridge Apostles, Bloomsbury, and the philosopher, G. E. Moore, have been the subject of considerable discussion. See Rosenbaum's *Victorian Bloomsbury*. In the first volume of his autobiography, *Sowing*, Woolf assesses Moore's basic arguments as well as their influence on himself, Strachey, Keynes, and their fellow apostles, especially as these helped them discover what was "the basis, if any, for our or any scale of values and rules of conduct, what justification there was for our belief that friendship or works of art for instance were good or bad. . . . He and we were fascinated by questions of what was right and wrong, what one *ought* to do" (S 162-63). Although the language of his letters to Strachey dramatizes an earlier and largely discarded self, the ethical concerns of that self remain central to his understanding of and wrestling with his roles as colonial administrator.
- 3 During Woolf's 1960 visit to Sri Lanka, the five volumes of the Official Diaries that he had kept as Assistant Government Agent were returned to him. They were published in *The Ceylon Historical Journal* two years later. In 1963, they were republished by The Hogarth Press along with the 1921 *Stories From the East*.
- 4 Both manuscripts are in the Leonard Woolf Papers at the University of Sussex.
- 5 In *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf writes both within and against imperialist/colonialist assumptions. Unlike Leonard's Beddagama, Virginia's up-river village is pure invention, a diorama in an imperial exhibition and her tourists stare at the native "other" in unquestioned metropolitan superiority (see Wollaeger). However, at the same time, "the primordial din of the jungles of South America . . . ultimately undermines the coherence of colonial, patriarchal language" so that Rachel's final voyage is "beyond the reach of the paternal world" (Montgomery 34, 53). See also John P. McCombe, Jane Cummins, Mark Hussey, Andrea Lewis, and Theresa Thompson, who discusses the two texts together, reading *Village* in terms quite similar to Ito's (see next note).
- 6 This is a fairly typical response. In a 1975 essay, Gillian Workman argued that Woolf "was a moral imperialist at heart," that underwriting everything was "the assumption that civilized man, unlike savage man, could control the jungle" (18). More recently Yuko Ito has argued that "Leonard's ideal colonial community is fantasized, and he shows the existence of this imagined community as an excuse for his own imperialist activity" (140).
- 7 There are occasional problematic moments. For example, in the passage containing the observation, cited above, that "man alone is . . . dominated by his desire," the narrator observes that people who live in such villages "are very

near to the animals; in fact, in this they are more brutal and uncontrolled than the brutes . . ." (42). This may seem patronizing, but the generalization that moves from villagers to animals to "man" includes the narrator, levelling the space between them. Implicated in his own fiction, the narrator is largely exempt from the imperial gaze.

- ⁸ A photocopy of the manuscript is in the Woolf papers at the University of Sussex. The manuscript itself was given to the library of the University of Peradeniya by Trekkie Parsons, Woolf's executrix, in 1974.
- ⁹ See *The Manuscripts of "A Passage to India"* for the omitted passages (242-43). Forster described the process of willed not-knowing in a 1924 letter to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, quoted in the Abinger Edition of *A Passage to India* (xxvi).

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