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## VITA'S MODERNISM: THE GREEN SACKVILLE-WEST

**Abstract:** The reservations of Virginia Woolf about Vita Sackville-West's fiction have long dominated her legacy. What Marina McKay calls the "decisive historicist turn in modernist studies" continues to exclude Vita because she is written off as a reactionary, yet her garden writing challenges pastoral ideals. As a garden writer, she undermines beliefs about women and the natural world. Vita was a green modernist, keen to revise the Victorian image of women and flowers in safe intimacy; "Come into the garden, Maud" gives way to new dignifying of the garden's resistance. She advocated "violence" in her writing while de-mystifying traditional gardening language. At the same time, she elevates the quasi-mystical nature writing of D. H. Lawrence and his challenge to man's domination of nature. Vita's Sissinghurst, long assumed to be an aspect of her conservative, aristocratic character, reveals on closer examination the trouble with privilege. Study of her garden writing also leads to a fresh reading of her novel *All Passion Spent* where she challenges human claims to mastery over the vital experience of the natural world.

**Key words:** anthropocentrism or homocentrism, ecocriticism, feminism and gardening, garden writing, modernism, pastoral

Vita Sackville-West is remembered as gardener, popular novelist, and aristocratic poet of *The Land* (1926), her long Georgic that celebrates the agricultural year in Kent: "Classic monotony, that modes and wars / Leave undisturbed, unbettered."<sup>1</sup> Her link to pastoral has led critics to overlook her modernism. What Marina McKay calls the "decisive historicist turn in modernist studies"<sup>2</sup> has not helped her reputation because she is written off as a member of a dilettante, landholding class, out of touch with the concerns of urban modernists.<sup>3</sup> Her most recent biographer restricts Vita's modernism to the novella *Seducers in Ecuador* (1925): "Vita's [subsequent] books [...] confirmed Vita's aesthetic credentials as those of a traditionalist and a conservative."<sup>4</sup> Although eco-critic Greg Garrard has reevaluated pastoral as "infinitely malleable for differing

1 Vita Sackville-West, *The Land* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, reprint 1939), 1.

2 Marina McKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 11.

3 Susan Bazargan argues "the 'naturalness' of rural poverty and destitution goes unexamined" in *The Land*. See "The Uses of the Land: Vita Sackville West's Pastoral Writings and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," *Woolf Studies Annual* 5 (1999), 33.

4 Matthew Dennison, *Behind the Mask: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 2014, 171.

political ends,”<sup>5</sup> the innovative aspects of Vita’s writing still seem to be overshadowed by assumptions about her patrician view.

Vita’s admirer Geoffrey Scott is less often quoted than Virginia Woolf on Vita, but his astute comments reveal her modernism to be more than a single experiment. Annoyed by Bloomsbury’s dominance and fearful that Vita would be over-schooled by Woolf, he urged her to consider her strength in opposition to Woolf’s style: “Virginia forged her method for her own very personal perception of phenomena. Your intimate instinctive apprehension is I think at the opposite pole to hers [...] and is I should say *au fond* nearer to Lawrence’s.”<sup>6</sup> Scott may have been the first to identify Vita’s link to D. H. Lawrence, an affinity she later claims in her garden writing as a shared preference for violence in writing. Scott claims for her “more lasting-power than the cleverness of Bloomsbury,” recognizing “an unwieldy *something* in almost all your books which has more reality in it than any amount of modish psychology and modish technique.”<sup>7</sup> Victoria Glendenning believes “Vita agreed with this really. The ‘unwieldy something’ that she felt sometimes as her strength and sometimes as her failing was going into *The Land*.”<sup>8</sup> This “unwieldy something” and fondness for violence in writing appears in her informal garden writing of columns in *The Observer*, reprinted in six separate volumes. In those essays, she reveals resistance to garden experts while advocating a deep respect for plants. Her novel *All Passion Spent* (1929) features a heroine approaching death, who honors the kinship of human and non-human nature. In that novel, as in her garden writing, Vita strives to unsettle her audience by debunking traditional tropes and redefining pastoral values for a skeptical age. In opposition to notions of gardens as dignified, didactic spaces for female accomplishment, she respects the garden’s resistance to control as an opportunity for meaningful submission to the natural world.

## I. The Myth of Mastery

The behavior of plants is indeed inexplicable. It breaks all of the rules; and that is what makes gardening so endlessly various and interesting.<sup>9</sup>

There is the echo of Antigone’s link to chthonic forces in the many green modernists who observe the earth as an ally against the brutal rule of a warring patriarchy. Katherine Mansfield poignantly memorializes her brother “blown to bits” in Belgium

5 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 33.

6 Letter of 1924 as quoted by Victoria Glendenning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 142.

7 *Ibidem*.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 Vita Sackville-West, *In Your Garden Again* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1953; Oxford: Isis 2001), 67.

with her New Zealand stories.<sup>10</sup> Mansfield's aloe blooming only once every hundred years allows Linda Burnell, a character based on her mother, to imagine a serene female flourishing, detached from the demand for yet another child, a male heir, whose future, in fact, though not in the story, brings the terrible sacrifice of the unburied soldier.<sup>11</sup> The language of Vita's garden writing also reflects "the undeluded, disenchanting and knowing modern attitudes to war."<sup>12</sup> Vita did not escape the harrowing effect of the two wars, the later enlisting both her sons. Her growing retreat into her garden, described in Nicolson's and Raven's recent books on Sissinghurst, makes her striving after a modern language to elevate flowers both salutary and moving.<sup>13</sup>

Vita had a habit of keeping a bloom on her desk so that she might examine it intently, an intimacy divorced from the instrumentalism of a traditional garden project: "My flowers are mostly (not all) intimate flowers, which gain from being intimately observed; and this can only be done when one can pick up the pot or vase off a table, and stare in odd moments when one has nothing else to do."<sup>14</sup> By briskly confining this practice to "odd moments," she avoids the image of sentimental flower arranging. Vita advocates "recklessness" in gardening and "violence" in garden writing.<sup>15</sup> Her unwillingness to observe the usual feminine decorum attracted readers to her weekly columns and charmed listeners on BBC radio.<sup>16</sup> Her advice on gardening often includes stubborn argumentation against male authorities, a trait shared with her biographies of women. In *Aphra Behn: The Incomparable Astrea*, she takes pride in that tendency: "I have gone to some length into the destructive arguments advanced by Dr. Bernbaum."<sup>17</sup> Even when she offers specific approaches, she seldom utters absolutes; her contentious caution indirectly sharpens her authority. Challenging accepted accounts of plants, she conveys a skeptical spirit to match her unregulated pleasure in the garden.

10 Anthony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Viking, 1980), 183.

11 Katherine Mansfield, "Prelude," in *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, vol. 2, eds. Gerri Kimber & Vincent O'Sullivan (Edinburgh: University Press, 2012), 73. On the anachronistic presence of the war in Mansfield's childhood story "Prelude," there are two essays in *Katherine Mansfield and World War One*, eds. Gerri Kimber et al (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014): Alex Moffett's "Katherine Mansfield's Home Front," 69-83, and Richard Cappuccio's "War Thoughts and Home," 84-97.

12 MacKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence*, 24.

13 Vita Sackville-West & Sarah Raven, *Sissinghurst: V.S.-W. and the Creation of a Garden* (New York: St. Martin's, 2014); Nicolson, Adam, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* (New York: Viking, 2008).

14 Vita Sackville-West, *Some Flowers* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1937; New York: Abrams, 1993), 1.

15 See "Outside the Garden Gate" in Judith Page and Elise L. Smith, *Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 38-49.

16 The *Observer* columns ran 1946 to 1961. See Glendenning on Vita's radio work, 208. See also Dennison, 190-96.

17 Vita Sackville-West, *Aphra Behn: The Incomparable Astrea* (London: Gerald Howe, 1927). See Foreword, i. In that biography she devotes 17 of 78 pages to refutation.

Her style imitates the unpredictability she attributes to Lawrence Johnston's garden at Hidcote Manor.<sup>18</sup> Rather than trace a visitor's orderly progress through the garden rooms, her unruly account turns back on itself: "Nor must I forget the quincunx of pleached hornbeam, set behind the two small garden-houses. It may not be an exact quincunx in the geometrical sense, but the word will serve."<sup>19</sup> The hornbeams at Hidcote do not form an exact *quincunx*, the pattern of five pips on dice, but the Latin word adds a labial workout and spondaic cadence to dramatize astonishment: the **quin cunx** of **pleached horn** beam. Her account is just one of many challenges to older garden geometry; Hidcote delighted her because it broke with both Victorian and wild-garden traditions, incorporating formality along with the esthetic she and Johnston inherited from the Irish advocate of wild gardens, William Robinson.<sup>20</sup> By the time Vita is writing, Robinson and influential English garden designer Gertrude Jekyll have reviled Victorian carpet bedding with plants-as-soldiers standing in orderly rows, and Vita acknowledges: "What gardener can afford to garden on the grand scale nowadays?"<sup>21</sup>

Instead of relying on grand formal schemes, gardeners can stretch the imagination with provocative plants, giving visitors a share in the excitement of plant-hunting:<sup>22</sup>

I had planned my *Verbascum Brusa* [sic] against the dark background of the yew hedge. [...] For my own part I had compared them to giant Roman candles, fireworks, tethered to the ground, but somebody came along and said they were like some strange sub-marine growth, waving about; and somebody else said they ought to be growing in a primeval landscape with a pterodactyl browsing amongst them.<sup>23</sup>

18 Jenny Uglow calls the American-born Johnston's Oxfordshire garden one of the "most original gardens of the first half of the twentieth century." After Cambridge and service in the second Boer War, Major Johnston began his garden in 1907 on "windswept fields" and developed "compartments flowing downhill [...] offering alluring glimpses, or surprises, or sudden distant views." See *A Little History of British Gardening*, (London: Pimlico, 2005), 251.

19 *In Your Garden*, 227.

20 It is hard to exaggerate the impact on 20<sup>th</sup> century gardens of Robinson's *The Wild Garden* (1870) and *The English Flower Garden* (1883). He began as gardener's boy in County Wicklow, left Ireland, and found work at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kensington. Charles Darwin was his sponsor at the Linnean Society. He spread his extensive knowledge of plants and ideas about naturalistic planting, using hardy perennials, in his magazine, *Gardening Illustrated*. See Uglow, *A Little History*, 224-25; 228.

21 *A Joy of Gardening* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 101.

22 Vita is "in search of rare and interesting plants," *In Your Garden*, 222. Vita was certainly aware of Gertrude Jekyll's influential garden layouts, her "mixed borders and striking single-color schemes." See Sarah Rutherford, *The Arts and Crafts Garden* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2013), 58. Jekyll, from a wealthy family and formally trained as an artist, collaborated often with renowned architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. She was the talented workhorse of the arts and crafts garden movement, but Vita seems more strongly affected by the figure of Reginald Farrer whose hunting of Alpine plants and flamboyant writing appealed to her venturesome spirit. Farrer died in 1920 on one of his trips to seek plants in China. He came from Clapham, North Yorkshire, where he returned to develop his Alpine garden in a quarry on family property. See this essay's third part and Nicola Shulman's *A Rage for Rock Gardening* (London: Short Books, 2002), esp. 51-2.

23 *In Your Garden*, 95-96.

Vita relished responses to her provocative plants. She shared with her 18<sup>th</sup> century predecessors a manipulative bent, the creation of a garden that stages the uncanny. She writes repeatedly of her “taste for greenish flowers.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, the wild garden esthetic had elevated subtle variations in green, but there is nothing subtle about some of her favorites, such as the anemic *Molucella laevis*, Bells of Ireland.<sup>25</sup> The butterfly rose *Mutabilis* “is likely to please anybody with a freakish taste.”<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the traditional authorities, Vita downplays her expertise; she elevates a neighbor's greenhouse and quarter-acre garden. The neighbor is a wise crone in her “seventh decade,” vastly superior to the so-called experts. The wise gardener may be the friend and neighbor Katherine Drummond, to whom Vita dedicated her poem, *The Garden* (1946).<sup>27</sup> Vita carried the discussion of a gifted neighbor over several years in her garden column touting her practice in contrast to her favorite targets, the nurserymen: “A cottage friend of mine who grows some superb cyclamen on her kitchen window-sill tells me that her grandmother advised her to water them with weak tea. This may sound like an old wife's tale, but the tales of some old wives sometimes turn out to be right.”<sup>28</sup> Three years later, she returns to the gifted neighbor as a model of success: “Successful gardening is not necessarily a question of wealth. It is a question of love, taste, and knowledge. The neighbor about whom I was writing [...] possesses all these virtues, added to fingers so green that the water must surely turn emerald in the basin every time she washes her hands.”<sup>29</sup> Vita lovingly describes her neighbor's greenhouse:

It would make any professional laugh, and would send him away scratching his head with a lot to think over. She does the oddest things. She digs up clumps of violets [...] and as she takes the trouble to whitewash her pots, instead of leaving them their normal hideous terra-cotta colour, you may imagine how the flowers gain in beauty [...] There are cardboard dress-boxes tied round with string to prevent them from disintegrating, and old Golden Syrup tins, and even some of those tall tins that once contained Slug-death.<sup>30</sup>

Vita never places herself in a league with this frugal neighbor whose higher esthetic leads her to transform “hideous” terracotta and cultivate violets in winter.

In her *Some Flowers* (1937), awe at cottagers appears first in the chapter “*Lilium Auratum*,” in which she digresses on the unmanageable Madonna lily just to show how contradictory authorities can be:

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24 *Ibidem*, 41.

25 Vita Sackville-West, *Even More for Your Garden* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1958, Francis Lincoln, 2004), 31.

26 *V. Sackville West's Garden Book*. Ed. Philippa Nicolson (Slough, Berkshire: Hollen Street Press Ltd, 1968; New York: Atheneum Press, 1979), 127.

27 Vita Sackville-West, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gardens* (London: Penguin, 1951), 14-15.

28 *In Your Garden*, 42.

29 *Ibidem*, 44.

30 *Ibidem*, 44-5.

On the divergent side we are told (a) that the Madonna lily revels in a heavy mulch of manure, and (b) that manure is the one thing she cannot abide. We are told a) to plant her among other growing things, that her roots may be shaded; b) to plant her where the hot sun will ripen her bulbs [...] (c) to lift her every two to three years (d) never at our peril to move the bulbs at all.<sup>31</sup>

She lampoons the experts who exaggerate the prospects of this hapless lily: “On the unanimous side we are told that the Madonna lily is the easiest of all lilies to grow with complete success, and that, as every gardener who has not the luck to be a cottager knows, is totally and miserably untrue.”<sup>32</sup> As in her biographies of saints, Vita takes grim pleasure in enumerating misguided efforts by authorities. The extended description of the violated body of the Madonna lily anticipates a fiasco recounted in gruesome detail in *The Eagle and the Dove* (1943). There it is the body of Teresa of Avila, repeatedly exhumed and finally mutilated by her own Abbot in desperate pursuit of a sacred relic. To borrow a phrase from that narrative, “the imagination shudders at its contemplation.”<sup>33</sup> In her garden writing, Vita recounts the efforts of occupants of great houses like herself who try to emulate cottagers with offerings of “purifying grit,” “soap-suds,” and even car exhaust: “I would, in short, do anything to please them, but all my efforts have led me to the sad conclusion that the Madonna lily, like the wind, bloweth where it listeth.”<sup>34</sup> The myth of mastery cannot be sustained.

Vita urges readers to follow Robinson’s caveat, “The sacrifice of flower gardens to plants that perish every year has often left them poor of all the nobler plants.”<sup>35</sup> She also echoes the dismissive tone of Reginald Farrer, the English plant hunter who introduced naturalistic rock gardens, when she disdains predictable groupings: “I do not myself, very much like the association of lilies with shrubs. It always looks to me too much like the-thing-one-has-been-told-is-the-right-thing-to-do. It savours too much of the detestable shrubby border effect.”<sup>36</sup> In *Some Flowers*, Vita’s choice of interesting plants “that should be painted” may strike us as heterodox, but like Robinson and Farrer before her, she sees no contradiction in including the non-native species among her nobler plants. More surprising and democratic is her inclusion of humble zinnias in her pantheon. She excludes many of the simple beauties in favor of rugged naturalized specimens, ranging from the evanescent Algerian Iris to the vivid and aggressive Chinese Witch Hazel with its “spider-like” flowers.

<sup>31</sup> *Some Flowers*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Vita Sackville-West, *The Eagle and the Dove: A Study in Contrasts, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Purnell & Sons, reprinted 1953), 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Some Flowers*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> William Robinson, *The English Flower Garden* (London: J. Murry, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., 1933; New York: The Amaryllis Press), 1989, 41.

<sup>36</sup> *Some Flowers*, 108-9.

Supporting Vita's preference for striking perennials over uniform shrubs is her association of shrubs with the Edwardian gardens at Knole. Cutting roses from those shrubs was as close as her mother ever came to gardening in a setting maintained by her staff. In *Pepita*, Vita depicts the pathos of an aging Lady Sackville handicapped by ignorance in the garden. She would waylay a passing plant seller outside her city home and descend to the garden in her nightgown, covered with a cloak of Venetian velvet, to direct her own gardener in "the planting of plants as never plants were intended to grow [...] she could sink them into the ground and pretend they had grown there [...]" Perhaps of all the odd corners of her garden the one she liked best a sort of rockery entirely planted with flowers made of china.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Lady Sackville was the anti-type of the wise cottager. Vita's disapproval recalls the admonition of the painter G. D. Leslie: "It seems as hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of garden as into that of heaven. The thing is worked for him by hirelings, whose own the flowers are not."<sup>38</sup> Vita recognizes the trouble with privilege in its most extreme form, an absurd disconnection from the material earth.

## II. "A light and volatile existence" in *All Passion Spent*

"Every true artist is the salvation of every other."<sup>39</sup>

"So all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiersias."<sup>40</sup>

Widowed at 88, Deborah Holland in *All Passion Spent* is another antitype of Lady Sackville. Deborah is an *artiste manquée*, unimpressed by society and signally responsive to the natural environment. Freed from the ambition of her powerful husband Henry, erstwhile Viceroy to India and Prime Minister of England, she moves to a modest house in Hampstead Heath, much to the astonishment of her conventional children. She had spotted the house and garden years before and had found it suggestive of an artist's life.

The narrative of the widow's escape makes use of modernist juxtaposition. Each stop on the underground punctuates Deborah's recollections. Her thoughts are un tethered from her surroundings until the train pulls into the station. One stop interrupts memories of her husband deluding "legions of people into believing that they had really secured his interest. (Tottenham Court Road.)"<sup>41</sup> At the empty house, Deborah

37 Vita Sackville-West, *Pepita* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937), 286-287.

38 Francis Jekyll, *Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir* (London: Bookshop Roundtable, 1934), 131.

39 D. H. Lawrence's Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1922), Ch. 16, 236.

40 T.S. Elliot's "Notes" to "The Waste Land", in *Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962), 52.

41 Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent* (London: Hogarth, 1931), 82.

embraces kinship with spiders, “impudent inhabitants blowing, waving, running, as they listed,” and contemplates companionship with natural things:

These things – the straw, the ivy frond [threading through the window], the spider, – had had the house all to themselves for many days. They had paid no rent, yet they had made free with the floor, the window, and the walls, during a light and volatile existence. That was the kind of companionship that Lady Slane wanted; she had had enough of bustle, and of competition, and of one set of ambitions writhing to circumvent another.<sup>42</sup>

In her meditation on straw, ivy, and spiders, she observes their material otherness, limiting her use of Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy, that “curious web of hesitating sentiment”;<sup>43</sup> instead, she embodies what Lawrence Buell calls the environmental imagination, “human selves as unstable constellations of matter occupying one among innumerable riches in an interactive biota.”<sup>44</sup> Buell surveys nature writers who strive toward “relinquishment of homocentrism.”<sup>45</sup> For almost a lifetime, Deborah has forgone weaving webs: “She wanted to merge with the things that drifted into an empty house, though unlike the spider she would weave no webs. She would be content to stir with the breeze and grow green in the light of the sun, and to drift down the passage of years, until death pushed her gently out and shut the door behind her.”<sup>46</sup> She has left behind her part as the dutiful wife to Lord Slane in India and in London.

At his death, her children are stunned by her “emancipation.”<sup>47</sup> She does not resent her reduced income because she is not acquisitive. Her eldest daughter watches “in silent rage” as she hands her jewelry over to Herbert “the heir”: her daughter thinks “Such simplicity amounted to imbecility.”<sup>48</sup> Yet such detachment allows Deborah to dispassionately review her life and her unfulfilled wish to be a painter. Reminiscence of Henry’s interference in her plans dominates the novel’s second part, climaxing in a flashback to the 17-year-old Deborah’s fantasy of boyishness:

For the thoughts which ran behind this delicate and maidenly exterior were of an extravagance to do credit to a young man. They were thoughts of nothing less than escape and disguise; a changed name, a travestied sex, and freedom in some foreign city [...] that fichu would be replaced by a shirt—and here the fingers felt for the knot of a tie; those skirts

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 91-2.

<sup>43</sup> Ruskin contrasts the Greeks, who believed God was in nature, with later writers whose practice of “giving sympathy to nature” becomes, for Ruskin, contrived and untruthful. *Works of John Ruskin, Modern Painters*, “Of Classical Landscape,” Part 4, Ch 13, 177, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38923/38923-h/38923-h.htm#CHAPTER\\_XIII](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38923/38923-h/38923-h.htm#CHAPTER_XIII).

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard, 1995), 167.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> *All Passion Spent*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 76-77.



would be kicked for ever aside—and here very shyly this time, the hand dropped towards the opening of a trouser pocket.<sup>49</sup>

She admires her prior yearning for the “travestied” masculine self: “*Then*, she had been face to face with life, and that had seemed a reason for a necessity for the clearest thinking; *now*, she was face to face with death, and that again seemed a reason for the truest possible estimate of values, without evasion. The middle period alone had been confused.”<sup>50</sup> The novel’s challenge to a unified biography and a sequential development of character borrows from the modernist approach to new biography more daringly presented in *Orlando*.<sup>51</sup> While Suzanne Raitt credits Woolf’s daring, it is equally important to acknowledge Vita’s success in incorporating a view of the de-centered self within an orthodox character and recognizable novelistic structure, a modernist novel for general readers.<sup>52</sup> By placing unconventional recognitions in a conventional, attractive woman late in life, she is normalizing what others regard as eccentric. The reader never shares the children’s disapproval of their mother.

Seeing Deborah’s “middle period” as a prolonged travesty reinforces her questioning of the unitary self and its inevitable tie to the physical body. While recalling her love for her husband, she ponders the unstable self: “Who was the she the ‘I’ that had loved? And Henry, who and what was he?” She decides the sense of self is a product of routine, and love a matter of the situation: “It was all words now, without reality. The only things which touched reality were the routine of her life with Genoux,” her devoted lady’s maid, “the only person who knew exactly what she meant by a sudden exclamation as she fell back into her chair, the bond between herself and Genoux thereby strengthening to the pitch of the bond between lovers, of an exclusive physical intimacy.”<sup>53</sup> Frail but stimulated by her new life, she looks forward to weekly visits from her landlord Mr. Bucktrout, who, despite his surprising apocalyptic beliefs, hires a contractor to remedy the “Falling, falling” condition of the old house. Deborah views her own death with less anxiety because the kindly Bucktrout avoids euphemisms in discussing her limited occupancy. The tyranny of the body in old age interests her: “her body had, in fact, become her companion, a constant resource”; in her indomitable artistic spirit she is able to find her bodily preoccupation “rather than otherwise, an agreeable and interesting tyranny.”<sup>54</sup>

49 *Ibidem*, 148-149.

50 *Ibidem*, 166-167.

51 Suzanne Raitt, *Vita & Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 107-116.

52 *Ibidem*.

53 *All Passion Spent*, 194-195.

54 *Ibidem*, 194.

In the novel's third part, Deborah achieves that lightness denied her in society: "once more the reed wavering in the river, the skiff reaching out towards the sea."<sup>55</sup> When her forgotten admirer from India days, Mr. FitzGeorge, reattaches himself and leaves her a fortune and his art collection, she resists the worldliness of her stodgy, grasping children and leaves the art to the V & A, the fortune to the poor of the nation.<sup>56</sup> FitzGeorge is reminiscent of art collector Sir John Murray Scott and his legacy to Vita's mother. Lady Sackville sold his art and antiques after she prevailed over Scott's siblings in 1913. This was her second court appearance over a legacy, the first in 1910 when she testified to her illegitimacy in order to protect the inheritance of her husband (and first cousin) from her own siblings. The parallels to *All Passion Spent* lie in the frustration of grasping relatives.

One of Deborah's relatives applauds her decision, her musician great-granddaughter who, by the loss of the legacy, is freed from an unwanted engagement: "This child, this Deborah, this self, this other self, this projection of herself was firm and certain. [Young Deborah's] engagement, she said, was a mistake; she had drifted into it to please her grandfather."<sup>57</sup> In the presence of her young namesake, Deborah further relinquishes her identity: "This unexpected confusion of her own life with that of her granddaughter" is "as strange and as lovely" as her reunion with FitzGeorge.<sup>58</sup> Free indirect discourse supports this loosening of strict individual subjectivity. Deborah sees the individual much as Lawrence does, "no more than an accidental cohesion in the flux of time."<sup>59</sup> In his troublesome will, FitzGeorge has offered her a second chance to resist the worldly pressure that once undid her aspiration. Young Deborah is articulate about such choices, as though she had incorporated her great-grandmother's experience, dramatizing a unity across persons: "among the people I like, I find something hard and concentrated in the middle of them, harsh, almost cruel. A sort of stone of honesty."<sup>60</sup> That stone of honesty recalls the "unwieldy something" that Geoffrey Scott asserted in 1924 as a trait of Vita's artistry, and Vita in 1931 regards it as an essential value. FitzGeorge adds another startling trait to the Sackville-West poetics when he comes to Lady Slane's Hampton house and discovers, "Thank goodness, [...] she has no taste [...] There was no relation between [...] 'decoration' and real beauty."<sup>61</sup>

55 *Ibidem*, 283.

56 Glendenning, 35; 57-58.

57 *Ibidem*, 283.

58 *Ibidem*, 282.

59 D.H. Lawrence, "The Crown," in: *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* (Cambridge: University Press, 1988), 272.

60 *All Passion Spent*, 286-287.

61 *Ibidem*, 208.

### III. Violent Writing, Sacred Earth, and Unseen Worlds

"Nature has ideas of her own, which put ours to shame."<sup>62</sup>

"The stone of honesty," a "harsh, almost cruel" feature of Vita's writing that overrides taste, links *All Passion Spent* to her advocacy of "violent writing" in *Some Flowers*. Her understated title announces its modernity.<sup>63</sup> It is not *The Flower Garden*, but an eccentric gathering, each bloom "a painter's flower" with "a quality of its own" inspiring close examination.<sup>64</sup> The flowers embody a beauty that defies sentimental Victorian taste. Her terms also echo the modernist connection of terror to beauty. Violence is crucial to the apocalyptic modernism of writers like Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, proponents of Vorticism, who wrote of a culture war "to be fought for the sake of its violence."<sup>65</sup>

W. B. Yeats famously associated violence with the beauty of Irish Republican martyrdom in "Easter, 1916," "A terrible beauty is born." Vita mentions Yeats in her journal of 1924: "February 3. 34 Hill St. A real spring day at the cottages; we sat on the step in the sun, read Yeats, and were quite warm, surrounded by Canute, Wolf, Swend, & Enid [her dogs]."<sup>66</sup> Vita added a Yeatsian flourish to Rilke's lines in the *Duino Elegies*: "For beauty's nothing but the birth of terror, / Which we endure but barely, and, enduring, / Must wonder at it [...]" "Birth" does not appear in the original, "*das schöne ist nichts / Als des schrecklichen angang*" or, literally, "The beautiful is nothing but the beginning of the terrible."<sup>67</sup> Vita may not have fully shared Yeats's or Lewis's faith in the cleansing power of violence. However, she did adopt the rhetoric of violence as she sets out to claim allegiance with innovative garden writers of her day. Her most admired garden writers were two irascible men, Reginald Farrer, the renowned plant-hunter, and D.H. Lawrence, green modernist. Del Ivan Janic describes Lawrence as standing "at the beginning of the modern posthumanist tradition and of the literature of environmental consciousness."<sup>68</sup>

62 Vita Sackville-West, "Surprises," *Country Notes in Wartime* (London: Hogarth, 1940), 53-6, 54.

63 Harold Nicolson called his biographical sketches in a new style *Some People* (1927); Vita's title may be a play on his title suggesting personhood for flowers.

64 *Some Flowers*, 11.

65 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 9.

66 *Vita Sackville-West: Selected Writings*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 44.

67 *Duineser Elegien/Elegies from the Castle of Duino*, translated from the German of Rainer Maria Rilke by V. Sackville-West and Edward Sackville-West, "First Elegy," trans. V S-W (London: Hogarth, 1931), 4-5.

68 Del Ivan Janic, "Environmental consciousness in modern literature: four representative examples," ed. G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism* (London: Shambhala, 1995), 107.

In *Some Flowers*, Vita considers first Farrer for his “extravagance and *bravura*.”<sup>69</sup> She acknowledges his style does not appeal to all: “He has been accused of being too poetical and rhetorical. He was admittedly a conscious stylist.”<sup>70</sup> Farrer was also extreme in his willingness to risk his life in pursuit of unknown plants. Vita admired his ability to balance “lyrical prose and botanical precision”:

Take for example, his account of the first time he ever beheld the gentian which bears his name – “[...] the mouth and the wide gold flanges are of so luminous and intense a light azure that one blossom of it will blaze out at you among the grass on the other side of the valley [...] It is like a clear sky soon after sunrise, shrill and translucent, as if it had a light inside. It literally burns in the alpine turf like an electric jewel, an incandescent turquoise.”<sup>71</sup>

In Farrer’s violent prose, “a fresh crashing explosion of colour in the fold of the lawns,” she found language which conveys “something of the excitement and enthusiasm which fired the author”; she adds, “in spite of the excitement he never loses sight of his standards of comparison,” and concludes, “He can be accurate as well as extravagant.”<sup>72</sup>

Her other writing model was Lawrence, a herald of modern environmentalism as seen in “Flowery Tuscany” where he writes, “Man *can* live on the earth and by the earth without disfiguring the earth.”<sup>73</sup> From that essay, Vita quotes Lawrence on the radiance of flowers:

“How a colour manages to be perfectly strong and impervious, yet of a purity that suggests condensed light, yet not luminous, at least not transparent, is a problem. The poppy in her radiance is translucent, and the tulip in her utter redness has a touch of opaque earth. But the Adonis-blood anemone is neither translucent nor opaque. It is just pure condensed red, of a velvetiness without velvet, and a scarlet without glow.”<sup>74</sup>

Vita admired Lawrence as well as Farrer for recognizing the inchoate world underlying nature, the ability to “approach the flower as though it were a mystical thing, reflecting on each some strange beauty which is to be found in perfection only in another, unknown world.”<sup>75</sup> Her sample passage from “Flowery Tuscany” makes rhetorical use of negation, a precedent she follows in her own descriptions. Lawrence’s characterization of the anemone’s shade as a “problem” prepares the reader for the struggle to find adequate language for an ineffable thing. Vita calls “Farrer half poet, half botanist; Lawrence, wholly poet”; she adds, “There is one thing, however, which both Farrer

69 *Some Flowers*, 14.

70 *Ibidem*, 13.

71 *Some Flowers*, 13-14.

72 *Ibidem*.

73 D.H. Lawrence, “Flowery Tuscany,” *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays* (London: Penguin, 1999), 225-243, 226.

74 *Some Flowers*, 15.

75 *Ibidem*.

and Lawrence have in spite of their differences. They both write with violence and not with sentimentality.”<sup>76</sup>

Vita's admiration of writing with violence and without sentimentality helps to explain peculiar, almost cruel passages in her work, as when she peremptorily ends her praise of fuchsia with a violent gesture: “I like the ecclesiastical effect of their red and purple among the dark green of their foliage; and, of course, when you have nothing else to do you can go round popping the buds.”<sup>77</sup> Popping fuchsia was a way of queering the lady garden writer and undermining the expectations of modesty. Vita's impudence with the Incense plant, *Humea elegans*, might also be included under the rubric of violent and unsentimental writing. While she hurried the fuchsia to maturity, she cannot wait for the Incense plant to die: “I kept some sprays of it in a vase for so long that I began to loathe the sight of the thing; it turned dusty long before it started to fade and die; it reminded me of those Everlasting Flowers, the *Helichysams*, which are only too everlasting indeed.”<sup>78</sup>

Some plants like “those Everlasting Flowers” are well-named, but Vita takes exception to the sentimental gendering of others. The so-called “Lady Tulip” strikes her as especially misrepresented:

She [...] actually reminds one most of a regiment of little red and white soldiers. Seen growing wild on Mediterranean or Italian slopes, you can imagine a Lilliputian army deployed at its spring manoeuvres. I suppose her alleged femineity is due to her elegance and neatness, with her little white shirt so simply tucked inside her striped jacket, but she is really more like a slender boy, a slim little officer dressed in a parti-coloured uniform of the Renaissance.<sup>79</sup>

This re-gendering of “elegance and neatness” follows on her objection to feminizing clichés in *Some Flowers*. Her audience was familiar with the trope of women as flowers in poems like Tennyson's “Come into the Garden, Maud,” which inspired photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron. Garden historians may trace this trope back to Rousseau or even as far back as the *Song of Solomon* and *Romance of the Rose*. Vita self-consciously breaks with this feminine floral tradition.

Given the long history of floral women, Vita had to concentrate on un-gendering her own garden writing. She awards “dishonourable rank” to the overused genteel adjectives, “quaint,” “dainty,” and “winsome.”<sup>80</sup> The issue of “smell” arises as garden writers supply “genteel substitutions”: “‘Smells good’ is an honest phrase at least, and neither ‘scent’ nor ‘perfume’ nor ‘odour’ or ‘fragrance’ can take its place.”<sup>81</sup> She is similarly frank about the

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>77</sup> *In Your Garden*, 82.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> *Some Flowers*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*.

smell of her beloved Knole, “a mixture of woodwork, pot-pourri, leather, tapestry, and the little camphor bags that keep away the moth.”<sup>82</sup> In describing her desired visceral responses, Vita uses throughout her garden writing the verbs “startle,” “surprise,” and “shudder” as well as their participle forms. Her use of “shudder” recalls both Yeats’s and T.S. Eliot’s work. Frank Kermode calls Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” the “great modern shudder poem.”<sup>83</sup> Evaluating Tennyson with a modernist’s eye, Eliot observes that *In Memoriam* gives him “the shudder that I fail to get from anything in ‘Maud.’”<sup>84</sup> According to Kermode, since Yeats, the shudder “has acquired a strong sexual sense [...] orgasm accompanied by cosmic destruction.”<sup>85</sup> Vita appropriated this modernist use of the word shudder; its sexual suggestiveness empowering a full-bodied, intimate appreciation of her garden.

#### IV. Conclusion

There is a commonplace that Vita Sackville-West was a romantic in the garden, but this classification does not suffice. Vita’s anti-sentimental thrust links her to modernism, feminism, and environmentalism. She derided feminizing commonplaces about flowers as she celebrated material practices by wise, un-squeamish women. For Vita, gardens are not sentimental places; she declares war on tidy narratives of human mastery. In choosing her precedents, she explicitly ties her garden writing to Farrer’s and Lawrence’s styles. There is also the influence of the new biography running through Vita’s writing from her saints’ lives to her botanical portraits. Much of her garden writing is as exciting as she wished it, energized by intimate observation and impudent admissions calculated to unsettle her readers.

Along with Lawrence, Vita anticipated the thought of recent environmentalists: it is easy to imagine her delighting in Australian ecologist Val Plumwood’s rumination on her near-death by crocodile.<sup>86</sup> Both women celebrate epiphanies that challenge human exceptionalism. Vita’s determination to overthrow the myth of mastery coexisted with a wish for glimpses of an unseen higher beauty. She was keen on the element of surprise that teaches us to “approach the flower as though it were a mystical thing, reflecting on

82 Vita Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1949), 12.

83 Frank Kermode, “Eliot and the Shudder,” *London Review of Books*, v. 32, no. 9, 13 May 2010, 13-16, 14.

84 *Ibidem*, 13. (Eliot as quoted by Kermode.)

85 *Ibidem*.

86 Val Plumwood, “Tasteless: Towards a Food-based Approach to Death.” *Environmental Values* 17, no. 3 (2008): 323-30, <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/plumwood-val-tasteless-towards-food-based-approach-death>, accessed July 30, 2018. Plumwood asserts the need to restore wonder while not being side-tracked by rationalist dismissal of anthropomorphism. See her “Journey to the Heart of Stone,” in *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmental Criticism*, eds. Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2007), 17-36.

each some strange beauty which is to be found in perfection only in another, unknown world.”<sup>87</sup> As it does for the artist protagonist in *All Passion Spent*, Vita's connection to non-human nature makes death surprisingly approachable and conventional good taste irrelevant. I began by connecting Vita's rebellious spirit to Antigone as well as to her modernist contemporaries. In the era of world wars, when so many despaired of any order, Vita championed a sustaining connection to the earth, undermining claims of human triumph over it.

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87 *Some Flowers*, 15.

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