

2011 William H. and Jane Torrence Harder Lecture, Cornell Plantations

“Literature, Life and Vita Sackville-West”

Molly Hite, Department of English, Cornell University

Say the name Vita Sackville-West and you produce the kind of *frisson* that Vita herself evidently produced simply by walking into a room.

But it’s a different *frisson* for two different audiences. One group says, “Oh, Vita Sackville-West: Sissinghurst.” The other says, “Oh, Vita Sackville-West: *Orlando*.”

Sometimes these two constituencies are entirely separate: I’ve met people who know Vita solely for her magnificent gardens and gardening advice, and others who know her entirely as the seductive muse of lesbian passion—or to use the term then current, Sapphism. In the latter case, Vita was the woman who inspired and, as it were, starred in Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando* (which Woolf called “a biography”), and who was the influence prompting both the great materialist-feminist essay *A Room of One’s Own* and Woolf’s most innovative novel, the 1931 “playpoem” *The Waves*.

David McDonald and I will try to bring these two streams of influence together this afternoon, but in our case it takes two people for the two areas of emphasis. David will tell us about garden innovations and the garden writing. He sees Vita as a tremendous influence on a turn in the concept of the English garden. And he has all the eye candy. Vita undoubtedly would have loved how sexy he makes plants, because that was rather the way she felt about them.

My visuals are fewer and less seductive, but then I’m doing the gossipy part: Vita’s larger-than-life personality. . . and also her larger-than-individuals heritage, which plays such a great role in the identity she formulated for herself. I also deal, much too briefly, with her literary influence on Virginia Woolf, which is the way she first came into view for me.

I do want to note one more aspect of Vita Sackville-West, though. Even academic literary scholars today have lost most of our sense of her as a very successful writer. She was a best-selling novelist, who began publishing with Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press as a favor to Virginia and arguably put them on a solid footing for the remainder of their lives. The novel I especially like, *All Passion Spent*, was published in 1931, when Vita was 36. It’s about an 88-year-old woman—a woman generally regarded as beautiful, well-behaved, and a bit dim—who has spent her life as the wife of a prominent and illustrious man. On his death, this old woman quietly shakes off her children and grandchildren and goes off on the Underground to lease a house in Hampstead that she noticed 30 years before, to live the life that was interrupted when she accepted the great man’s proposal.

All Passion Spent is a delicate, charming novel in a slightly retro—which is to say late Victorian or Edwardian—style. Here is a passage, around the middle of the book, where she is

reflecting on the proposal of marriage from the man who became her husband, and her initial response to it:

It was clearly impossible, to her mind, that she should accept. The idea was preposterous. She could not possibly follow Mr. Holland into that sphere; could follow him, perhaps, less than any man, for she knew him to be very brilliant, and marked out for that most remote and impressive of mysteries, a Career. She had heard her father say that young Holland would be Viceroy of India before they had heard the last of him. That would mean that she must be Vicereine, and at the thought she had turned upon him the glance of a startled fawn. Instantly interpreting that glance according to his desires, Mr. Holland had clasped her in his arms and had kissed her with ardour but with restraint upon the lips. (144)

The passage is remarkable for its ironic compression. It shows how a young man full of himself and confident in his future can translate a young woman's shock and bewilderment into acceptably sexual responses: "the glance of a startled faun" is for him erotically submissive, for her simply startled. The description allows us to view how Victorian conventions of wooing constituted entrapment for young women, at the same time as it shows us a woman who has never acquiesced to the terms of her long, apparently happy marriage. Vita was clearly an imaginative and empathetic writer, able to understand and invent personalities far from her own.

In 1927 Vita won the Hawthornden Prize, awarded every year for the best work of fiction or poetry in Great Britain. She won it for her long poem *The Land*, which few people find at all compelling now (although I've discovered that there is a small fan club for it on the Internet). *The Land* is the basis for the poem that Orlando composes through her centuries-long history. It carries on a Victorian tradition of skillful, readable and vaguely patriotic poems—a tradition that Vita in many ways represented. Virginia always told Vita she was a "traditional writer." In diaries and letters to others, Virginia often put it more harshly, as in the comment in a letter to Jacques Raverat early on that Vita wrote "with complete competence and a pen of brass." Woolf also noted at several points that Vita was too "fluent," a problem many of us may wish we had, except that for Vita it really *was* a problem, although it also suggested her characteristic excessiveness. Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen she wrote five full-length novels, one in French, and five plays. She declared in a letter to Virginia that she would rather "fail gloriously than dingily succeed," but although the sentiment was true to her temperament, it was also true that too often she dingily succeeded.

In the final analysis, Vita was less a writer than what Virginia Woolf termed a "personality." In an essay called "Personalities" that Woolf wrote while she was involved with Vita, she describes truly great writers as having "something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about them," which makes them relatively uninteresting biographically. She continues, "It is the imperfect artists who never manage to say the whole thing in their books who wield the power of personality over us." Vita did wield the power of personality over most people. Here is Virginia describing her shortly after they had met: [S]he shines in the grocers shop in Sevenoaks with a candle lit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung.

To see Vita “shining,” we need to look at the Laszlo portrait, painted when she was eighteen: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Laszlo_-_Vita_Sackville-West.jpg

This was a time when Vita, in her own “confession,” wrote that she had grown “less ugly.” The reaction to her at that age seems to confirm that the painting shows more than most photographs do of what attracted people of both sexes.

Vita “shone” in many places and for many different people. Her male suitors include Marchese Orazio Pucci, a son of prominent Florentines, who followed her about Europe for several years before finally accepting her rejection and hurling himself into the war; Lord Lascelles and Lord Granby, each heirs to one of the greatest estates in England, and of course Harold Nicolson, whom she married. All these men simply fell over upon seeing her, and then pursued her. She had that sort of effect.

But her strongest erotic tendencies were, to use the word current at the time, Sapphist. A newspaper photograph from that time, showing her going to court to testify on her mother’s behalf, shows her at her most alluringly androgynous. She could be an Edwardian dandy or a beautiful young woman, and the young man and woman flanking her clearly are both smitten. (They are, respectively, Harold Nicolson, then her suitor, and Rosamund Grosvenor, a cousin with whom she was having a desultory affair.) www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jsackville.htm

The situation of the trial was scandalous, as Sackville-West situations tended to be. Vita’s mother had inherited a fortune from an admirer who had for years lived with the family, and the man’s brothers and sisters were contesting the will. Vita’s spectacular mother won the case, and Vita, the even more spectacular daughter, was able to live for a few more years at Knoll, the Sackville estate, which she later lost to a male relative.

Vita met Violet Keppel, later Trefusis, at school when she was only 11 and Violet two years younger and carried on a near-legendary affair with her through the early years of her marriage. Her relationship with Virginia Woolf was interwoven with liaisons with at least two other women. Woolf got very irritated over those other women—not only that they were *there*, but also that they weren’t in her league: she felt Vita should have better taste. I should note that both Harold Nicolson and Leonard Woolf knew of and condoned the Vita-Virginia affair. Virginia wrote about their bond in her 1926 diary, “—so we go on—a spirited, creditable affair, I think, innocent (spiritually) & all gain, I think; rather a bore for Leonard, but not enough to worry him. The truth is one has room for a good many relationships.”

By all accounts, including Leonard Woolf’s, it was a relationship that did Virginia worlds of good. Despite the vast differences between the two women, Vita’s vitality—she was well-named—as well as her affection and support stimulated Virginia to do some of the most remarkable writing of the twentieth century.

Vita is shown “pearl-hung,” as Woolf had noted, in a photograph captioned “Orlando on her return to England.” The novel *Orlando* makes use of Vita’s family history as well as Vita’s

present-day flamboyance. To be a Sackville was to be an aristocrat with a lineage that went back to at least the sixteenth century in English history. This is why the character Orlando can encompass this history from the sixteenth century to “the present,” which is identified as “Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight”—the day the novel was published. The class privilege that Vita grew up with is central to her enormous self-confidence, a quality that bowled over Virginia and bowled over all of Vita’s other conquests. But Vita was also an aristocrat from a shady family, and in many respects the flaunting of conventional sexual mores that distinguished at least the two preceding generations of Sackvilles gave her an amazing absence of sexual shame. She minded very much if she finally realized she had hurt someone, but she didn’t mind at all that she did not conform to “respectable” gender roles or sexual identities.

Woolf captures the particular sexual complexity and sinuosity that Vita embodies in the character of Orlando, who begins life in the sixteenth century as a beguiling, if rather awkward, boy, and then at the beginning of the eighteenth century takes a longish nap in Constantinople, where Vita and Harold lived for a time, and awakens to find herself a woman, but otherwise exactly the same person as before. Orlando’s biographer, the narrator of this story, refuses to explain or accept theories that Orlando was “really” a woman all along, or that Orlando was still a man, but a little confused. The biographer proclaims, “Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.” As Woolf developed in *A Room of One’s Own*, by the eighteenth century women could write for a living. She seems to reason that from the eighteenth century on it was simply more enjoyable to be female than to be male.

Sexuality and gender become even more unstable when Woolf brings Orlando into the Victorian era, and Orlando, now female, realizes from a tingling in her ring finger that she desperately needs to be married:

Meanwhile, she became conscious, as she stood at the window, of an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her, as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing scales. Now her toes tingled; now her marrow. She had the queerest sensation about the thigh bones. Her hairs seemed to erect themselves. Her arms sang and twanged as the telegraph wires would be singing and twanging in twenty years or so. But all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand [...]. Orlando could only suppose that some new discovery had been made about the race; they were somehow stuck together, couple after couple, but who had made it, and when, she could not guess. It did not seem to be Nature.

In what seems a satirical re-envisioning of the psychoanalytic theory of sexual maturation, where sexual excitement inhabits various parts of a child’s body before settling (in cases of “normal” development) in the genital organs, Orlando experiences an obviously erotic tingling that finally locates itself in the finger requiring a wedding band. Victorian conventions

have mandated that all human beings seek to bond heterosexually in order to produce families; thus at this stage of *Orlando* men and women are “somehow stuck together, couple after couple,” although Woolf’s narrator shrewdly observes that this organization is social rather than biological: “It did not seem to be Nature.” Whether or not she wills to be “stuck” to a man, Orlando is powerless before a historical force determining her to become the heroine of a romance novel. Her luck holds, however, for the man she meets, very romantically of course, is one Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire, and the attraction that seizes them both takes this form (and this is a wonderful passage of dialogue):

“Oh! Shel, don’t leave me!” she cried. “I’m passionately in love with you,” she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously.

“You’re a woman, Shel!” she cried.

“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried.

Men who are women and women who are men add to the complexity generated by the man who becomes a woman but is still (in the words of the biographer) “the same.” In *Orlando*, the vacillations of sex and gender produce an ideal marriage, which is emphatically not a traditional one.

Both Vita and Virginia had marriages of this sort, which after some very rough patches allowed for all sorts of other relationships, as long as candor and tenderness between spouses was the primary value. We tend today to have reified sexuality into an identity: one is either gay or straight, or perhaps bisexual. But sexual behavior, like gender, has nuances that make something as definite as an identity hard to establish. For instance, Virginia Woolf considered Vita a “Sapphist,” but did not apply the word to herself, even though she was in the middle of a torrid relationship with Vita, and even though she had had romantic relationships with at least two other women. The assumptions of both, however, led to a friendship that lasted until Woolf’s death. In their openness to desires that went beyond a single name or definition and their emphasis on the primacy of love and friendship over sexual passion, we see a place where aristocratic license meshes with the progressive practices of the Bloomsbury group, a collection of people otherwise tending to be socialist and anti-aristocratic.

Vita influenced works by Woolf beyond *Orlando*. In a memoir recounting Woolf’s “talks to girls” at Girton College, Cambridge, one of the university “girls,” Kathleen Raine, reported that Virginia arrived with Vita, the two of them dressed beautifully and descending “like goddesses” on the reception room. (Vita must have rigged up Virginia for the occasion, because Virginia had trouble with clothes and usually came out frumpy.) *Orlando* had just been published and was selling well, and both women had the status of literary superstars. In the talks, as later in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s persona begins her discussion of the theoretical new novel by a contemporary woman in this way:

I turned the page and read . . . I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Chartres Biron is *not* concealed? We are all women, you assure me? Then I

may tell you that the very next words I read were these—“Chloe liked Olivia . . .” Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.

“Like” here covers a range of intensities, from friendship to amatory passion. In the earlier draft of the essay and in the talks, Woolf had played up the suggestiveness further, saying while pretending to read from the new novel—

“Chloe liked Olivia; they shared a” [. . .] the pages had stuck; while fumbling to open them there flashed into my mind the inevitable policeman; the summons; the order to attend the court; the dreary waiting; the Magistrate coming in with a little bow; the glass of water; the counsel for the prosecution; for the defense; the verdict; this book is [called] obscene; & flames rising, perhaps on Tower Hill, as they consumed <that> masses of [print] paper

Here the pages came apart. Heaven be praised! It was only a laboratory. [. . .] They were engaged in mincing liver which is apparently a cure for pernicious anaemia.

The references in both the manuscript and the published version are to the *Well of Loneliness* trial of 1927, where Radclyffe Hall’s famous lesbian novel—but not Hall herself—was tried for and convicted of obscenity. One reference to this trial remains in the published version, to Sir Chartres Biron, who was the presiding magistrate of the case. The trial and the novel itself were very important to Vita, who organized witnesses for the defense—they never got to speak, as the only being allowed to “testify” was the book: the prosecutor read passages from it out loud to a titillated crowd.

Vita was not usually political in her ideas or activities, and her reflexive political positions tended to come from her heritage. She was conservative, nationalistic, patriotic, and pro-Empire. When she met Virginia Woolf, she had no interest in feminism, a progressive political position, but Virginia succeeded in converting her. In many respects, the last chapter of *A Room of One’s Own* is Woolf’s triumphant synthesis of feminism and what had always mattered to Vita—freedom of sexual choice and the freedom to publish.

I also see links between Vita’s influence and Woolf’s most experimental novel, *The Waves*. I haven’t seen much done on this subject, and certainly the book that Woolf called “abstract,” “mystical,” and “eyeless” (we are invited to hear “I-less”) seems the opposite of anything Vita would write . . . or even read.

Yet *The Waves* and *Orlando* were conceived at the same moment, and conceived because of Vita. The event that led to them involved not Vita’s presence but Vita’s absence. In October of 1930 Woolf reported in her diary that she was both depressed and relieved because Vita had *not* come to visit when she had said she would. This combination of emotions seems to have set up the mood that Virginia describes as “frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is.” Her reflections are on “life,” that huge topic that resonates through *Orlando*. But the two very particular childhood memories she brings up

become important repeated motifs in *The Waves*. In a diary entry early the next year, the stimulus becomes obvious:

Two nights ago, Vita was here; & when she went, I began to feel the quality of the evening—how it was spring coming: a silver light; mixing with the early lamps the cabs all rushing through the streets; I had a tremendous sense of life beginning; mixed with that emotion, which is the essence of my feeling, but escapes description . . . I felt the spring beginning, & Vita's life so full & flush; & all the doors opening; & this is I believe the moth shaking its wings in me. I then begin to make up my story whatever it is; ideas rush in me; often though this is before I can control my mind or pen.

Her original title for *The Waves* was *The Moths*. And she imagined *The Moths* as perhaps “autobiography,” centering around a singular “she.”

But the book she went on to write, almost helplessly and *very* fluently, was *Orlando*, a faux-biography, not an autobiography, centered around a singular, personality: a “she” who was also, and in several respects, a “he.” Only after *Orlando* was finished did she return to her most difficult fictional innovation.

And here is where Virginia Woolf seems to show the influence of Vita's gorgeous gardens. Woolf's magnificent “playpoem” *The Waves*, like that great house Sissinghurst, is bounded by a garden. In the soliloquies of the six main characters the garden figures as scene of many of their earliest formative experiences:

In particular, the garden sets one of the great primal scenes of the novel, involving four of its six characters when they are young children at school. Louis, the colonial boy, feeling outcast, uses his study break to hide among the flowers and tells himself—

I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world [. . .] All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs [. . .]

My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth and slowly, thickly, grows larger and larger. Now something pink passes the eyehole. Now an eyebeam is slid through the chink. Its beam strikes me. I am a boy in a grey flannel suit. She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered. (*Waves* 6-7)

Louis clearly is comforting himself by masturbating, *being* the stalk and bringing a drop out of its tip. Jinny, running by, sees one result of this activity, the shaking leaves, and rushes in to kiss Louis, an act of courage for her. Susan, witnessing the kiss, is furiously jealous and runs away, and Bernard, who has seen the whole thing, runs after her to console her with a story. The incident shapes each into the character she or he grows up to be, and each continually recalls it from her or his own perspective.

Even more important, we encounter the garden as an essential structural element of *The Waves*. It is always present in some form in what most commentators call the “interludes,” the passages in italics that begin each of the nine sections chronicling the lives, from childhood to old age and death, of six friends. In the first section, where the sun “has not yet risen,” the garden is only indicated: “*The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another*” (Waves 3, italics in original). But this interlude introduces a creation story, and with the advent of light, the garden grows. In the second section we return to it as “The sun rose higher,” and it acquires an aural dimension: “The birds, whose breasts were specked canary and rose, now sang a strain or two together, wildly, like skaters rollicking arm-in-arm, and were suddenly silent, breaking asunder” (19). Moving to the fourth session, when “the sun rose,” we see the advent of death, and also of nature red in tooth and claw. The sonorous birds are also predators, and the cycle of growth entails decay. The passage is powerful, well-observed, incantatory: a sensuous litany of disgust.

Then one of them, beautifully darting, accurately alighting, spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm, pecked again and yet again, and left it to fester. Down there among the roots where the flowers decayed, gusts of dead smells were wafted; drops formed on the bloated sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run. Yellow excretions were exuded by slugs and now and again an amorphous body with a head at either end swayed slowly from side to side. The gold-eyed birds darting in between the leaves observed that purulence, that wetness, quizzically. Now and then they plunged the tips of their beaks savagely into the sticky mixture. (Waves 53)

Then, very quietly, the scope of the garden enlarges. The introduction to the fourth section, where the sun is “risen,” brings in an ominous simile, perhaps of inevitable Imperial decline. The spray of the continually falling waves beyond the garden rises “*like the tossing of lances and assegais [these are African spears] over the riders’ heads,*” and the birds act in a group to peck “*furiously, methodically, until the shell broke and something slimy oozed from the crack*” (78).

In the fifth section, the sun is at its zenith. This interlude introduces the death of the leader of the six friends, Percival, an ambivalently coded and unvoiced character whom the others admire extravagantly and regard as supremely charismatic. We learn that Percival died as a colonial administrator in India. And to herald this section, we find that the provincial English garden has been pulled into the dimensions of a great portion of the earth:

Now the sun burnt uncompromising, undeniable. [...] it fell upon the arid waste of the desert, here wind-scourged into furrows, here swept into desolate cairns, here sprinkled with stunted dark-green jungle-trees. It lit up the smooth gilt mosque, the frail pink-and-white card houses of the southern village, and the long-breasted, white-haired women who knelt in a river bed beating wrinkled cloths upon stones [...].

The sun beat on the crowded pinnacles of southern hills and glared into deep, stony river beds where the water was shrunk beneath the high slung bridge

*so that the washerwomen kneeling on hot stones could scarcely wet their linen;
and lean mules went picking their way among the chattering grey stones with
panniers slung across their narrow shoulders . . . (107)*

The emphasis on “southern,” the “mosques,” and the “long-breasted, white-haired women” extend the garden to the radically “other” dimensions of North Africa and the Middle East, soon to be fronts in a second World War and scenes of revolutionary uprising. The expansion here, however, is not really ominous but, rather, enlarging: the upper-class, self-contained “world” of the six friends is not entirely *the* world, and the changes, even the death of a hero whom Bernard later imagines “would have shocked the authorities” eventually is not the end of anything.

But also, and surely not coincidentally, the description evokes some of the sites of Vita and Harold’s greatest travels, while Harold was a diplomat and Vita was dallying with Virginia: Cairo and Luxor, Turkey, Persia, and Constantinople, where Vita made her first garden. All the plant life that Vita viewed and, on occasion, collected in these travels came back to the world that she and Harold made at the ruined castle and surrounding property that they bought in 1930. This is the little world made cunningly that we see in this photograph, Sissinghurst in its glory. (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-sissinghurst-castle)



Vita Sackville-West: Reading

Jane Brown, *Vita's Other World: A Gardening Biography of V. Sackville-West*, Viking, 1985.

Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1983.

Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1990; first published 1973—contains the complete text, hitherto unpublished, of Vita's 1920 "Confession"—compelling reading!

Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent: A Novel*, Virago Modern Classics, 1983; first published Hogarth Press, 1931.

Vita Sackville-West, *The Illustrated Garden Book*, Atheneum, 1989.

Vita Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, William Morrow, 1985.

Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volumes Three and Four, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982.

Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Volumes Three and Four, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977 and 1978.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, introduction and annotations by Maria DiBattista, Harcourt, series ed. Mark Hussey, 2006; original published Hogarth Press, 1928.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, introduction and annotations by Susan Gubar, Harcourt, series ed. Mark Hussey, 2005; original published Hogarth Press, 1929.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, introduction and annotations by Molly Hite, Harcourt, series ed. Mark Hussey, 2006; original published Hogarth Press, 1931.