

## **Approaching Perfection: Vita Sackville-West's Ultimate Pursuit in the Other Way**

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**Abstract:** Vita Sackville-West devoted herself to approaching perfection in the Other way of both gender and solitude. In regard to gender, she practiced dominating masculinity in her homosexual and heterosexual affairs and managed to equilibrate what she was in lack of as a female. In regard to solitude, she succeeded in counterbalancing what she had not achieved in real life by realizing her dominating dreams with wild imaginative sex-swapping in her novels and being remote as much as possible from the modern society in her poems and gardening. The root of Vita's Other way of life might be discovered in three dimensions. Biologically, she did have more extrovert physical male features than ordinary women; psychoanalytically, she had the "active imagination" or "creative apperception" as the "capacity to be alone" motivated by the wills to pleasure, to power and to meaning; and metonymically, the context of her family, lovers and necessary triggers contributing to her views of life and relevant values established the indexical link between her choosing gender and solitude to approach perfection in the whole life.

**Keywords:** Vita Sackville-West, Otherness, Approaching Perfection, Wills, Creative Apperception, Metonymization, Gender Identity

### **1. Introduction**

Vita Sackville-West, who wrote over thirty-five books with an ingenious mockery of societal norms, has a unique historic position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in literary and cultural senses. She had so many identities – such as being the daughter of a dominant coquettish mother and a quiet father, the wife of a homosexual husband, the mother of two boys, a dominant bisexual lover of many men and women, a female loser who had no right to inherit the beloved estate Knole from her parents, a creative and mystic poetess, a passionate and imaginative novelist and an expert gardener – as to attract great attention from biographers (Glendinning, 1983; Brown, 1985; Dennison, 2014), scholars of feminism or lesbianism (Fassler, 1979; DeSalvo, 1982; Blair, 2004; Johnston, 2007), and numerous researchers of her masterful poems and novels.

Glendinning (1983) offers an authentic detailed chronological narration of Vita's whole life based on the historical letters and photos offered by Nigel Nicolson, Vita's elder son. It is an "adventure story" rather than "literary criticism" though it is "characterized and quoted a lot from V. Sackville-West's prose and poetry" (Glendinning, 1983, p. i). Brown (1985) reveals Vita's inner heart by presenting her gardening welcome by Britain. Compared with former autobiographers, Dennison (2014) has a global and much sharper literary criticism on the excellent combination of Vita's physical sexual world and fictional kingdom full of passions and imagination. While many scholars of lesbianism tend to have a cultural view of Vita's construction of androgyny, Johnston (2007, p. 58) argues that Vita tries her best to create a rhetorical truth of her neat duality based on Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter's sexology to

defend her sexless yet harmonious marriage with so many extramarital homosexual and heterosexual activities.

Inspired by the studies above, this research will first offer a brief description of Vita's Other ways to live with an adroit balance between her sexual and solitary life (negotiation of gender identity vs. solitude), and then offer a psycho-cognitive view of why and how it is possible for Vita to manage the Otherness to approach her perfection.

Philosophically, "[O]therness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself." (de Beauvoir 1956, p. 15) As far as gender is concerned, "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...but defined and differentiated" as "the incidental, the inessential" because man thinks that "[He] is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 1956, p.15). Indeed, the Other is constructed as "a negation of identity" and "a motive for potential discrimination." The identity would be gained only when the Other manages to "escape the oppression forced upon them by in-groups," or, when she or he succeeds in "conferring upon themselves a positive, autonomous identity" (Staszak 2009, p. 48).

Vita Sackville-West, as the Other in the patriarchal society during the Edwardian Age, rebelled against the oppression forced upon her by the in-groups and fought for her own "positive, autonomous" identity to approach the physical and mental perfection in sexuality and solitude in the Other sense.

## 2. Otherness in Marriage and Liaisons

Vita's unconventional performance could be observed in the sexless togetherness, construction of androgyny, and spiritual preference in dozens of liaisons.

### 2.1 The Sexless Togetherness as a Mask

Despite bearing two children, Vita's marriage was characterized by sexless togetherness due to each partner's homosexuality. At the very beginning of the proposal by Harold, Vita found that he totally lacked vigorous physical desire for her. Likewise, Harold identified their "so-indispensable-to-each-other" relationship as "respect for one another," "ability to relax completely in one another's company," "stimulation of one another and the harmony of their togetherness" (Connolly, 2005, p.78). Strangely enough, this soothed "the wounds this daughter of Knole sustained as a result of her sex" and suggested "a husband who was foremost a 'playmate' and a 'companion'." By mutual consent, this "childishness" implied not only sexlessness in the wedding lock but more separate extramarital "adult" diversions for a long term. That is why Vita would take the first few years of their marriage as a "sunny harbor" for "her own craving for contact and companionship." (Dennison, 2014, p. 76) "Neither abasement nor subjection came naturally." (Dennison, 2014, p. 93)

All of this was poeticized by Vita's quoting the following lines from Khalil Gibran's *Marriage*:

But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
(Gibran, 2020, p. 617)

Under the beautiful discursive masks, the couple achieved their own homosexual pleasures, in which Vita's large banquets of lesbian affairs were dotted with several heterosexuals from time to time (Gledinning, 1983).

## **2.2 Constructing the Identity of Androgyny**

During the Edwardian Age, a clear division between male and female was still philosophically and sociologically made by "characterising women as passive and illogical in contrast to active, productive, creative, logical, rational men." (Dennison 2014, p.123). What Vita encountered in *Sex and Character* by the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger simultaneously infuriated and confirmed the "theory of her own duality and, in particular, to the masculine side of her nature," (Dennison, 2014, p. 124) which was enhanced by the hatred for Eddy, the heir to Knole and the baronial title.

### **2.2.1 Hatred for Eddy**

At the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a female had no legitimate rights to inherit her parents' titles and estates. Gender was an accident of birth, but only maleness was rewarded (Dennison, 2014, p. 73). Despite of her great love for the Knole estate, which teemed with so many dreams of her childhood and of her identity as the daughter of a baron, she was bitterly denied all of this forever "through a technical fault" over which "she had no control" at all just because she was a female (Sackville-West, 2010, p. 232). On the contrary, both the title and the beloved Knole would be legally passed to her cousin Eddy, son of Lionel's brother Charles. Ironically, he was in every way her inferior in fighting and war games and cricket and boyish bluster. Namely, "[I]f Vita was hardy and masculine, Eddy was soft and girlish" (Dennison 2014, p.73) No wonder that she "used to hate Eddy when he was a baby" and she "wasn't much more" (Sackville-West, 2010, p. 232). This "legal" issue troubled her with a paradoxical feeling of both hatred and craving for maleness.

### **2.2.2 Craving for Maleness**

In her fantastic wishes, she was eager to possess Knole and to become a writer, both of which were "'masculine' impulses," just as "the writers and those Sackville heroes she admired were all male" (Dennison, 2014, p. 77). While "[her] life in retrospect is a wholesale rejection of the idea that sexual gratification exists as a masculine prerogative" (Dennison, 2014, p. 75), paradoxically, Vita had an inflamed craving for maleness in terms of rejection and refusal. Implicit in her fantasy life was "a rejection of that powerlessness" as "part and parcel of a woman's conventional existence."

On the other hand, Vita decided that in relationships, the male role was that of taking, not giving: an unthinking assumption of the upper hand. It was a role she herself would play. And "she was incapable of discerning the beauty of submission. It consisted of a refusal to compromise anything touching her self-identity. That identity, as we have seen, embraced both masculine and feminine." (Dennison, 2014, p. 74)

### 2.2.3 Dominating Partnerships like a Male

In her dozens of liaisons, homosexual or heterosexual, Vita never allowed the other party to interfere with her. As Vita wrote, “I took myself off whenever they threatened to interfere with me. If a woman began to attract me, even if the poor soul remained quite unaware of it, it constituted interference. It was all part of my settled policy” to lead a dominant role (Dennison, 2014, p. 76).

In the summer of 1910, for example, Vita’s catching pneumonia granted her a precious opportunity to “communicate” busily with Rosamund Grosvenor, Violet Keppel, Orazio Pucci and Harold Nicolson at the same time. All of them were driven to fall in such passionate love with Vita that increasingly each was aware of their conflicting claims on her affection. It was not the restful life,

but Vita enjoyed the distance between herself and the debutante world of ‘the little dancing things’; enjoyed too the tributes of those varied lovers whose suits she juggled with a degree of adroitness. She was instinctively proprietorial. ... and she does not appear to have questioned her right to the simultaneous admiration of Rosamund, Violet, Pucci and Harold. (Dennison, 2014, p. 78)

And freshness and dominance as well as narcissism sharpened her pleasure by realizing that image of herself in the male role of conqueror ... She enjoyed and needed sex, enjoyed the anticipation of fulfilment: she learnt to separate this need from all but temporary emotional involvement. Vita never accepted any lover’s argument that sex implied commitment. That refusal became her means of preserving herself and her marriage. Its consequence was that Vita hurt anyone who felt more strongly than she did.

(Dennison, 2014, pp. 144-145)

In the meantime, she had a mystic “ability to remain unharmed by emotional and sexual entanglements” (Dennison, 2014, p. 156).

If unsatisfied in passionate loves in the daily life, she had the second Otherness of solitude to make a stronger pursuit for approaching perfection in a fictional way.

## 3. Otherness in Creative Solitude

Living in a patriarchal society, Vita’s strong and passionate homosexual desires and performances had to be concealed by gardening, either private or public; or they were disguised by a lot of writings of abundant letters, poems and novels to restore, represent, recall, reimagine, redecorate and enhance the feelings they have experienced. When “the truth of fact” corroborated “the truth of imagination,” “a mission statement for Vita” (Dennison, 2014, p. 59) established the fundamental equation of pleasure and privacy (Dennison 2014, pp. xv, xvii). On the one hand, she never lost the taste for mental and sexual pleasures; on the other, she tried her best to balance “curiosity and wanderlust with a powerful need for solitude” (Sackville-West 1992, p. 97). She loved reading and writing literature with a “system of bluff” or “a read life at second hand,” by which she could be “content and withdrawn for a little hour from the dangers and fears” (Sackville-West 1933, p. 136). By resorting to solitude, Vita managed to keep a balance between excess and repose, extravagance and simplicity, roughness and beauty (Pomery, 1982, p. 288).

## 2.1 Reclusive and Aggressive Gardening

Vita enjoyed horticulture both theoretically and practically. She published several gardening books and made an outstanding garden in her own Sissinghurst. In the creation of Sissinghurst and its garden, “[Vita] was, I think, one of the happiest people I have ever known, for she loved them and they gave her complete satisfaction in the long years between middle age and death” (Woolf, 1967, p. 113). As an escape, Vita’s imaginative and physical immersion in gardening represents a running-away in order to “sink down through centuries to another clime,/ And buried find the castle and the rose” (Sackville-West, 1928, p. 50). As an act of aggression, her garden became Vita’s “final act of defiance” against those smouldering social conventions. “She approached it in vigorous spirit” with flaming courage (Dennison, 2014, p. 254) and wished “to be consumed entire” rather than being smouldered “knowing neither zest nor fear” (Sackville-West, 1933, p. 111).

## 3.2 Poems and Prose with Chopping Undercurrents

“[M]odernist lesbian writers manipulated discourse in order to express lesbianism, despite its label of perversion and invisibility by those in-groups.” (Johnston, 2007, p. 3) During Vita’s Edwardian Age, her rejection of conventional gender roles in sex was more controversial than it is today. Like much in her life, she attempted to resolve the issue through writing (Dennison, 2014, p. 75). Following Harold’s advice, her works were not only “the observations” but “the explanation of life” (Dennison, 2014, p. 172). The novels and poems and essays focus on her “[e]scape, self-indulgence and withdrawal from unpleasantness...with its inclination to fantasy and mythomania” (Dennison 2014, p. 268). As Dennison summarizes:

In her writing as well as her private life, consciously or unconsciously, she was a committed fantasist. Dramatic self-inventions were her literary stock-in-trade: fictional heroines whose dilemmas mirrored her own; heroes who achieved the outcomes to which Vita aspired but from which she felt herself excluded on account of her gender... (Dennison, 2018, p. 46)

### 3.2.1 Poems of Rebelliousness against Modernity

Vita wrote many poems, published or unpublished. The masterpieces are *The Garden* and *The Land*. In the former, Vita claimed for herself the role of “scholar of simplicity” in fallen leaves, in nature and the cycle of the seasons to be remote away from the earthly hypocrisy (Sackville-West, 1946, p. 127). She listed out themes for *The Land* under a heading of “Subjects”, some of which became central ideas and others show various convictions as background. They included dislike of modern life and vulgarity, love of the graces of life and retirement, struggle to obtain any form of satisfaction as probably part of the pleasure, courage in adversity, determination to find pleasure and not to succumb, non-sentimentality, death and loss, and success and reward (Pomery, 1982, p. 283). She built “so small a corner of so great a world” into an idyllic pasture, as sung in her famous poem *The Land*:

The country habit has me by the heart...  
Here meet and marry many harmonies;  
—All harmonies being ultimately one,—  
Small mirroring majestic; for as earth

Rolls on her journey, so her little fields

Ripen or sleep, and the necessities

Of seasons match the planetary law. (Sackville-West, 1926, pp. 5-6)

In solitude, she found her “[G]od alone in his creation, / Magnificent or detailed, in the skies/ Or in the leaf unfolding to the spring” (Sackville-West, 1937b, p.53).

Besides her remoteness from the crowded world, she also channeled that heroic bravado into her garden. “Dare/ Th’ unorthodox; be always bold; be prince;/ ... Fail if you must .../ But gloriously fail: the dream, the brag, / No prudent pose”, she wrote in *The Garden* (Sackville-West, 1926, p. 111). Vita’s rhetorics always insisted on unorthodoxy, glory, a vaunting dream and the combined suggestions of masculinity, power and status in the injunction: “be prince” whenever possible (Dennison, 2014, p. 254). Or, if not a “prince”, then become a “poet like the artisan” who, “lonely with his tools,”

...

Rejects, and chooses; scores a fresh faint line;  
Sharpens, intent upon his chiselling;  
Bends lower to examine his design,  
If it be truly made,  
And brings perfection to so slight a thing.

...

Yet in the ecstasy of his rapt mood  
There’s no retreat his spirit cannot fill,  
No distant leagues, no present, and no past,  
No essence that his need may not distil,  
All pressed into his service,

...

As the poor joiner, working at his wood,  
Knew not the tree from which the planks were taken,  
Knew not the glade from which the trunk was brought,  
Knew not the soil in which the roots were fast,  
Nor by what centuries of gales the boughs were shaken,  
But holds them all beneath his hands at last.  
(Sackville-West, 1926, *Angelus, Autumn*)

Vita wanted to become a lonely artisan who “brings perfection to so slight a thing” or a poor joiner who refuses to notice those nonessentials, spatially and temporally, and then “holds them all beneath his hands at last,” which echoes the distant cry for appropriating “a small manageable domain in a large unmanageable world” in her last masterpiece of *No Signposts in the Sea* (Sackville-West, 1985, p. 33).

### 3.2.2 Prose Works for Upholding Maleness

Vita in the guise of Sackville cavalier appropriated what she took to be the language of male discourse (Dennison, 2014, p. 87). In her imagination, every Sackville was a conquering hero and each was “the prototype of **his** age”<sup>1</sup> (Sackville-West 1965, p. 28). And Vita was just their latest incarnation for “[h]er life would retain this element of fantasy” (Dennison 2014, p. 42).

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<sup>1</sup> Bold emphasis added by the author of this paper.

In most of her prose fiction, “she celebrated a male version of herself” in terms of “control, possession, inheritance, fulfilment and love.” (Dennison 2014, p. 42) In *The Bull*, Vita transformed into a stout bull who “stand[s] four-square and lordly scan[s]/ His grass, his calves, his willing cows, / Male, arrogant, alone” (Sackville-West, 1933, p. 116). In *Challenge*, she became Julian buoyant with love for Eve. And she has dozens of incarnations of Peregrine Chase in *The Heir* who inherited and refused to give up the Tudor manor house of *Blackboys*, the handsome, fêted and secretive Sebastian in *The Edwardians* who became an heir to a fictional Knole, and Nicholas Lambarde in her unpublished story *The Poet* (Dennison, 2014, p. 57). She was all sides of Miles Vane-Merrick in *Family History*, who “wanted to retain his individuality, his activity, his time-table” and “to lead his own life, parallel with the life of love, separate, independent” (Sackville-West, 1932, p. 274). All male protagonists she created, however, “deliberately deny their sexual instincts and in this way forfeit the aggressor’s role.” (Dennison 2014, p. 75)

This is the other side of Vita’s coin—the life of her imagination, the life of her imaginative incarnation.

#### 4. Discussion

The question of why Vita establishes her identity of androgyny to approach perfection and how she is able to achieve it is very complex, which calls for a multi-dimensional view: biological, psychoanalytical and cognitive.

##### 4.1 A Biological View

Biologically, every human being is born with male and female hormones in which men show more dominant male ones while women more dominant female ones. As a female, Vita had more masculine features than other women,

At eighteen, there was a soft and gentle quality to Vita’s beauty. Later this softness gave way to something more florid: a harder, bolder, more masculine appearance, ‘all rather heroic and over life-size; all on a big scale; no feminine charm at all’, as she herself described one of her fictional alter egos. The shift would reflect a change in her attitudes. For the moment, youthful curiosity had yet to be overwhelmed by the certainties of middle age. (Dennison 2014, p. 55)

In her middle age, she became more strong and aggressive with a “thick black moustache” and “heavy eyebrows” which strongly “resemble[d] a puissant of blend of both sexes” (Glendinning, 1983, pp. 279, 286).

This might be the deepest root for her to establish the identity of androgyny, about which, unfortunately, very few instances of literary criticism could be found to date. To have a clear picture of Vita’s otherness to approach perfection, we need to take psychoanalytical and cognitive approaches. The former might be able to answer why she managed to take the “Other” way to fulfill herself and the latter, how it was possible for her to establish an indexical link between her choice of sexes and solitude and her ultimate pursuit.

## 4.2 A Psychoanalytical View

Within the macro-patriarchal frame in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychoanalysts often treated lesbian behaviors and narratives as neuroses and concerned themselves primarily with the nature and cure of them. Freud's notion of "bisexuality as the original state of an infant" (Johnston, 2007, p. 12) offers a perspective of why Vita had an inclination of bisexuality. Freud's theory, however, is not strong enough to explain why Vita underwent numerous heterosexual or homosexual affairs in her whole life, and why she was so versatile in gardening and writing. In this regard, theories of "three wills" (Frankl, 1992), "active imagination" (Storr, 1988) in the form of "lesbian aesthetic" (Galvin, 1999; Hallett, 1999), are quite inspirational and will be examined below.

### 4.2.1 Vita's Three Wills

Wills are "the canonical designator for a significant kind of control over one's actions" (O'Connor & Franklin, 2018), into which Frankl (1992) has a deep insight. According to Frankl (1992, pp. 57,1050), "[M]an's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives." "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual." Usually, a person is driven by three kinds of wills. Motivated by the **will to meaning**, first, a person has different ways to discover the meaning in life. When lucky enough to have a freedom of choice, she or he may achieve the meaning of life "by creating a work or doing a deed" or "by experiencing something or encountering someone." While an active life realizes values in creative work, a passive life obtains fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art, or nature. When in an extreme adversity, she or he will try their best to achieve the meaning by the attitude toward unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 1992, p. 115).

When the **will to meaning** has been frustrated to a certain degree, however, it would put on "various masks and guises" to cover, or rather, to decorate "the existential vacuum." And it would be "vicariously compensated for by a **will to power**, including the most primitive form of the will to power." Or, it would be replaced by "**the will to pleasure**" which "often eventuates in sexual compensation" with excessive "sexual libido rampant in the existential vacuum" (Frankl, 1992, p. 112).

Vita had an extremely entangled psyche with three wills—will to pleasure, will to power and will to meaning. By the will to pleasure, she had many pleasures in affairs, chiefly homosexual but dotted with heterosexual contact, in frequent traveling, in a lot of reading and writing, in gardening and even in naming plants in her garden. "Pleasure to her was entirely a private matter, a secret joke, intense, redolent, but as easily bruised as the petals of a gardenia." (Sackville-West, 1931, p. 268). By the will to power, she always tried every means to dominate the partners in every liaison, and also her husband, Harold Nicolson, in her own marriage. By the will to meaning, she wrote many poems and novels in which she underwent dozens of sexual metamorphoses from female to male, as well as essays on gardening which suggested her eagerness to be remote, away from the noisy crowd. By real and fictional means, she managed to achieve "the compartmentalisation of her life that was essential to her" (Dennison, 2014, p. XVII).



All of these wills, indeed, were related to her knowledge about the world and humans, upon which relevant values were established to define the direction of her performativity in acts and discourses.

#### 4.2.2 Vita's Creative Engine

Vita had two engines to drive herself to approach perfection. First, she had an "active imagination" or "creative apperception" by which she became versatile in gardening, in writing poems and novels and in her dominant arranging of dozens of affairs for her whole life. According to Storr (1988), some people are endowed with a "capacity to be alone" which is "linked with self-discovery and self-realization" of "one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses" (p. 21) by "active imagination" or "creative apperception." In Winnicott's phrase, creative apperception "depends upon linking subjective and objective; upon colouring the external world with the warm hues of the imagination" (p. 71). As Winnicott wrote, "[I]t is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living." At this moment, she or he might have "a dialogue with existence," "a dialogue with life," and "a dialogue with death" (p. 61). With active/creative imagination a person attempts to restore "a lost unity, or to find a new unity, within the inner world of the psyche, as well as producing work which has a real existence in the external world" (p. 123).

Driven by her active imagination, Vita developed her "lesbian aesthetic" which, in Galvin's (1999, p. xii) words, "comes out of necessity" within a heterosexual culture by imagining "other ways of speaking, new forms to articulate" her "visions of difference." Or, in Hallett's (1999) argument, it is produced by a "negotiation of realities" to establish "her own language" as a "doubled-voiced discourse" (pp. 23, 78, 80–85) with "elemental imagery" and emphasis on "performativity" (pp. 64–74, 48). Vita presented to the world a mask concealing "as much as it reveals" (Dennison, 2014, p. 54). Or rather, she deliberately cultivated a certain cleverness to soften "the blow of her unpopularity, which she attributed to her moroseness, pedantry, priggishness and savagery, as well as an appearance of aloofness that she was at a loss to explain." (Dennison, 2014, p. 41). That cleverness, for the most of her life, resorts to poems and novels full of elemental imageries of free sex-swapping traversing between the real and the ideal to show the performativity in an alternate way.

Closely related to her creative apperception is her second engine, namely, Vita had a Godly charisma in her partners' eyes, a perfect "gift of concealing between outward slovenliness and the capacity to look, suddenly, like Gods" (Glendinning, 1983, p. 348):

Vita's reputation has something [to do] with it, and her fame as a writer, and the romance Sissinghurst, and her seclusion, which made her friendship seem a special privilege—exciting, exotic, and irresistible...her powerful personality and physical appearance, her deep caressing voice, her patient way of encouraging people to talk about themselves, all contributed to her spell-binding quality, touching a nerve in women of little sexual sophistication who had never before been attracted to other women. (Glendinning, 1983, pp. 348-349)

#### 4.3 A Cognitive View

While a psychoanalytical explanation tries to solve the puzzle why she makes such a choice and why she is able to achieve the ultimate "Otherness" at last, a cognitive explanation attempts to

clarify how Vita's "Other" choice of sex and solitude indexes the ultimate meaning of life, namely, approaching perfection.

### 4.3.1 Core of the Metonymic Indexical Mechanism

Metonymy, as a figure of language and thought (Littlemore, 2015, p. 1) plays a part not just in language, but in gesture, sign language, art, music, film and advertising (Littlemore, 2015, p. i). Metonymy is:

a cognitive process in which one conceptual element or entity (thing, event, property), the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity (thing, event, property), the target, within the same frame, domain or idealized cognitive model (ICM). (Kövecses, 2006, p. 99)

As the metonymic relationship becomes more firmly established, "the connection between the two objects can take on a more ontological character, allowing for a firmer, indexical link between objects and language. An indexical relationship allows for language to have a much more direct impact on the object to which it refers." (Dickerson, 2012, p. 406)

Panther and Thornburg (2018, p. 124) offer a very illuminating metonymic frame (see Figure1) showing the basic metonymic relation with three layers in which the very core of Source (Conceptual Vehicle) and Target lies; the Source (S) indexes the Target (T) to construct a certain Content (C) with other conceptual components interwoven from the second layer, sometimes; both the S and T could be symbolized in a linguistic Form (F); and T triggered by certain situations and contexts may have other pragmatic effects in the third layer.

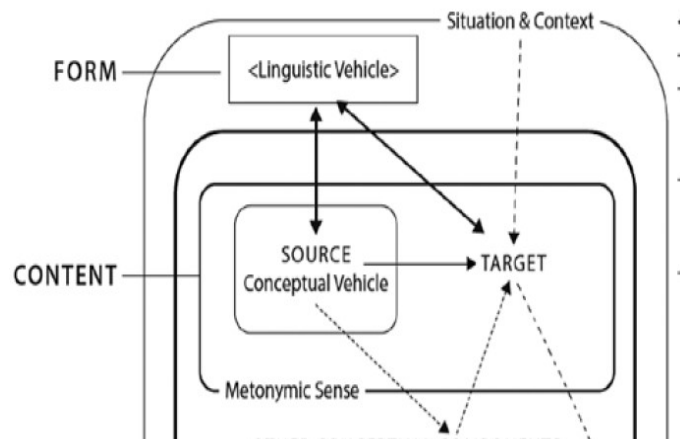


Figure 1. The Basic Metonymic Relation (Panther & Thornburg, 2018, p. 124)

In terms of its **semiotic** rigorosity, exhaustiveness, metonymization allows for the mental process in which the reference point (Source) indexicalizes the Target by foregrounding or backgrounding. And this metonymic ontologicality offers a significant approach, in Littlemore's (2015, p. 15) words, "to account for the complex, dynamic, nuanced, culturally resonant and multi-layered nature of metonymy in language and other modes of expression."

The term of “Behavioral Vehicle,” therefore, could be inserted to the right of “Linguistic Vehicle” in the third layer to enrich Panther and Thornburg’s metonymic theory (2018, p. 124), so that this paper has a new core frame of the Content which only belongs to Vita Sackville-West, a lady who restlessly pursued her ultimate meaning of life by sex and solitude in the “Other” ways (See Figure 2).

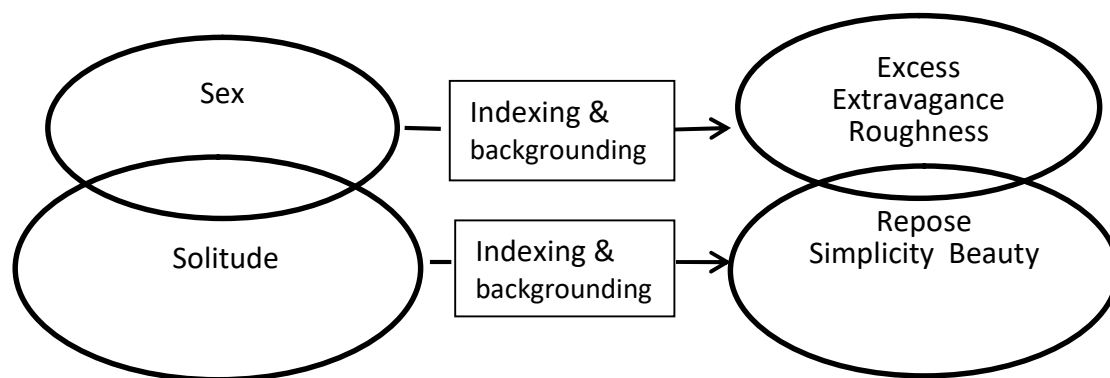


Figure 2. The Metonymic Indexicalization from Otherness to the Ultimate Meaning

On the left of Figure 2, the “Otherness” of sex and solitude are intermingled with each other, which indicates they cannot be separated from each other spatially or temporally since Vita was on the way to keep an adroit balance for all her life. While sex indexes and backgrounds excess, extravagance and roughness, solitude points to repose, simplicity and beauty. In this way, the concrete actions were foregrounded and the abstract existential meanings were backgrounded so that these two interweaving ultimate “Other” meanings of life were born for Vita to prospect, to experience, to digest.

In short, all the “Otherness” of frequent bisexual affairs and those mystic and remote discourses index her ultimate aim to appropriate “a small manageable domain in a large unmanageable world” (Sackville-West, 1985, p 33).

For the sake of clarity, however, this figure does not show situational contexts such as her family background, relationships of lovers, and triggers of Vita’s behavioral and discursive choices, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### 4.3.2 Situational Contexts and Triggers

Based on the model of “Basic Metonymic Relation” (see Figure 1), we shall further discuss the situational contexts and triggers including the roles of her family, lovers, and oppressive triggers which contribute to her views of life and values leading her to have strong wills to pursue perfection for the whole life.

#### 4.3.2.1 Family Background

The mother and father have their influences on Vita both separately and coordinately. What imprinted itself on Vita's childhood was the mother Victoria's "combination of intense love, possessiveness and an assertive sort of self-absorption. In different measures, those same characteristics would re-emerge throughout her life." (Dennison, 2014, p. 13) The father Lionel's "habit of entrusting intense emotions to the page and ordering those emotions through the written word would similarly form part of Vita's make-up" of writing quickly but with care (Dennison, 2014, p. 14). This coincides with one of Victoria's maxims confided to Vita: "One must always tell the truth, darling, if one can, but not all the truth; *toute vérité n'est pas bonne à dire*." (Sackville-West, 1937a, p. 230). Indeed, "her writing is full of hints – sometimes veiled, sometimes otherwise – indicative of her state of mind, her emotional dilemmas, the nature of her engagement with herself and the world around her." (Dennison, 2014, p. XIV)

The family, united or broken, shapes her permanent notion of sex, love and family. Vita's parents set up a family "less by the ties of affection than by those of convenience and convention" (Sackville-West, 1934, p. 14). She learnt the idea of the selfishness of sexual gratification, particularly male sexual gratification. Vita inherited a vigorous appetite for sex: the harem, like the bordello, was a region of consumption free of emotional entanglements. It offered no training in fidelity; it insisted on neither compassion nor consideration but sexual opportunism (Dennison, 2014, pp. 73,102). And in her parents' marriage:

Vita witnessed this breakdown. She absorbed a highly distorted idea of marriage at a time when she was insufficiently emotionally mature to set it in context or to recognise the unusual starkness of her parents' incompatibility. (Dennison, 2014, p. 48)

The collapse is "one factor which convinced Vita of her own duality" which she imagined "as opposites and therefore irreconcilable: propriety pitched against protest, conformity against self, kindness against cruelty, a free spirit or a prisoner" (Glendinning, 1983, p. 55; Dennison, 2014, p. 49). In her lover Violet's words, Vita did practice "purity and gravity on the one hand, dominance, sensuousness and brutality on the other" (Dennison, 2014, p. 49).

#### 4.3.2.2 Lovers as a Booster

For her whole life, Vita had dozens of lovers among whom Dorothy Wellesley and Violet Keppel, besides Virginia Woolf, played such an important role in Vita's life that they could be thought of as the booster of Vita Sackville-West to seek for her perfect life. Dorothy was "a natural rebel, rejecting all conventions and accepted ideas, living to proclaim herself as agnostic, a fiery spirit with a passionate love for beauty in all its forms...born with romantic temperament." (Glendinning, 1983, p. 113) At the same time, Violet

was aiming at a position where both she and Vita would be married women—marriage in their society being the passport to independence of movement and freedom from parental authority—that both husbands should be rejected or otherwise naturalized, and she and Vita should be free to pursue their ideals of freedom, beauty and excitement. It was the romance of life with Vita that she chiefly wanted: Violet was not very keen on sex, ever. (Glendinning, 1983, p. 98)

Vita was, indeed, just the blending of Dorothy's innate temperament and Violet's pursuit of freedom. She had never thought of marriage as "a natural state" but "an institution" (Nicolson,

1992, p. 184) and a “shield” for her “conducting discreet lesbian affairs” (Dennison, 2014, p.114) to pursue the identity of androgyny in her whole life. Under the cover of marriage, Vita enjoyed a lot of extramarital voluptuous excitement from heterosexual and homosexual activities, and much more by late night talking and frequent letter exchanges with lesbian lovers. With scores of years of romance with Virginia, for instance, she went to her bed only twice.

#### 4.3.2.3 Depressive Triggers

A series of depressive events occurred for the rooting and growth of Vita’s rebelliousness. Aged ten, she was terribly rejected when she proudly embroidered a mauve and yellow footstool cover for the dominant and inconsiderate mother; aged 15, little Vita won the first prize in a poem competition but was sourly discouraged by her parents; although the first school report showed that Vita was extremely good at English history and literature, she was not liked by teachers and classmates who thought her “a prig and a pariah;” aged 16, she narrowly escaped from being raped by her godfather (Glendinning, 1983, pp. 15, 26, 28).

Two more shakable events enhanced her steps of both aggressiveness and reclusiveness. First, “Vita’s own life would be shaped, indeed distorted, by her inability as a daughter to inherit her father’s title and estates.” “She was born at Knole,” for which she once claims “all the quality of peace and permanence...mellow age... stateliness and tradition.” Unfortunately, she died elsewhere, and struggled to reconcile “that quirk of fate” for her whole life (Dennison, 2014, pp. 13,15). Second, the Scott lawsuit cast “a long shadow” on account of its “public parade of family secrets” offending strongly “her own innate Sackville reserve” (Dennison, 2014, p. 99). It is so provocative as to depress Vita’s heart:

[I]f you knew how it would amuse me to scandalise the whole of London! It’s so secure, so fatuous, so conventional, so hypocritical ... so cynical, so humbugging, so mean, so ungenerous, so self-defensive ... so well-dressed, so up-to-date, so hierarchical, so virtuously vicious, so viciously virtuous. I’d like to tweak away the chair just as it’s going to sit down. (Pomeroy, 1982, p. 283)

Facing those complicated matters, Vita did not want to be made invisible, marginalized or excluded by the patriarchal institutions and discourses. On the other hand, she tried to escape from the modern loathing by her seclusion of reading and gardening.

#### 4.3.2.4 Summary of the Cognitive View

In communicating with the outer world including her parents, her friends, lovers, and those heroes in books, Vita had her own unique view of sex, love, family, nature of life and relevant values. In her eyes, “[N]othing is foreordained./ I hold my liberty/ Unstained and unconstrained” (Dennison, 2014, p. 50). And she believed that “the vitality of human beings is to be judged ... by the force of their emotion.” (Sackville-West, 2018, p. 8). She valued intensity of feeling and described the ideal approach to life as “the ardour that [lights] the whole,/ Not expectation of that or this” (Sackville-West, 1946, p. 10). It is clear that Vita’s notions of “holding my own liberty,” “force of emotion” and “intensity of feeling” fuel her strong wills to seek for the unique meaning of life.

To sum it up, the parents and lovers chiefly backgrounded her vision of marriage and love while those triggers started off her aggressiveness and reclusiveness.

#### 4.4 Consequential Behavior Pattern for Approaching Perfection

Vita discovered all those means, sex and solitude, real or fictional, male or female, aggressive and reclusive, to approach a perfect life just as “the artisan” works “lonely with his tools” and “brings perfection to so slight a thing” (Sackville-West, 1926, *Angelus, Autumn*).

In her daily life, Vita favored a family “in a **perfect**<sup>2</sup> glow of enthusiasm about Knole” (Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, p. 62); she appreciated a woman’s perfect nakedness (Vita’s diary, 19 February 1920, Lilly Library); she, enjoyed “a **perfect** suntrap”<sup>3</sup> with her husband, Harold (Brown, 1985, p. 57). At the outset of her romantic career, she established a perfect pattern of “juggling multiple lovers with no apparent sense of conflict or disloyalty” and exercised perfect “freedom of choice both romantically and sexually.” In other words, she enjoyed the state in which “freedom goes when the heart goes” (Sackville-West, 1921, p. 231).

When unsatisfied with the physical and psychological sensations, the intensely imaginative Vita would realize in her life the subjectivity both of reality and possibility in the fictional form. In the neverlands of her fiction, Vita changed her sex as a means of taking control and a preliminary to action. And she continually rewrote her own history by “swapping her sex” to perfect what she regarded as imperfections, which enabled her to love as she wished, totally unconstrained by social expectation (Dennison, 2014, p. 57). In the confession that became *Portrait of a Marriage*, she painted an alternative picture of “perfect happiness, perfect love, perfect Violet” (Dennison 2014, p. 129). In her final novel *No Signposts in the Sea*, Vita’s only overt mouthpiece for lesbianism in her writing, the heroine Laura described the “concord” between two women in an ideal relationship as “approaching perfection”, since she has

come to believe that even the strongest, the most self-sufficient, need one other person in their lives from whom nothing is concealed, neither the most important things nor the most trivial. Someone with whom at the end of the day one can sit over the fire and talk or be silent as the fancy moves one. (Sackville-West, 1985, p. 135)

#### 5. Conclusion

Vita, born with much more biological male features than other females and a great genius of creative apperception, was driven by the wills for pleasure, for power and for meaning to practice much masculinity, behaviorally and discursively. As a result, she had a very good balance between aggressiveness and reservedness, between excess and repose, between extravagance and simplicity, and between roughness and beauty, for her ultimate pursuit was to approach perfection, namely, to “appropriate a small manageable domain in a large unmanageable world” (Sackville-West, 1985, p. 33).

That’s the “Otherness” for Vita of seeing, doing, and feeling; that’s the ultimate meaning of life for Vita Sackville-West to pursue, although she sang a rather bitter song in her late years and felt a crushing sense of powerlessness akin “to hold[ing] the wind” “in a net,” to borrow Sir Thomas Wyatt’s words ( Sackville-West, 1961, p. 121).

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added by the author of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added by the author of this paper.

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