CROOKED RUINS: writing and gardening at Sissinghurst

Full of 'minor crookedness' is how the English writer and gardener Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) described the site of the ruined Sissinghurst Castle, as she and her husband Harold Nicholson (1886–1968) found it in 1930.[1] This unusual quality is what made the place appear perfectly suited to their vision of how, from a mutating garden, might emerge their ideal home: **'It was Sleeping Beauty's Castle; but a castle running away into sordidness and squalor.'**[2]

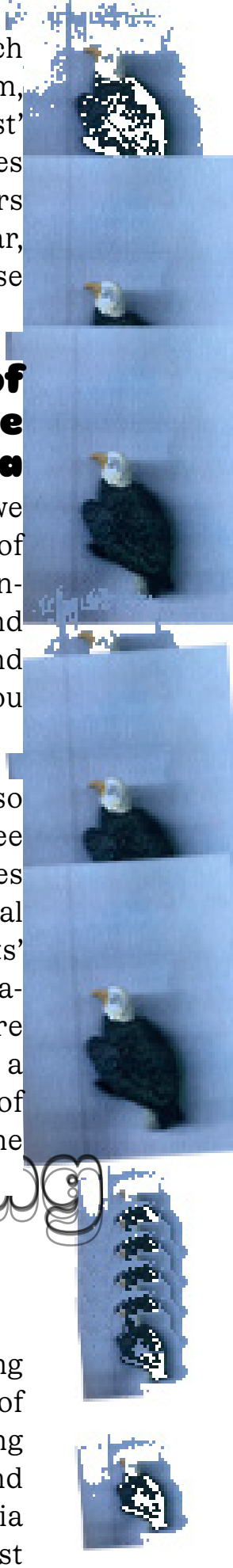
The description is evocative of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones's interest in depicting transformative states. It is particularly reminiscent of his seminal series 'The Legend of the Briar Rose', inspired by Charles Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty' fairytale, with each panel accompanied by a poem by William Morris. The first painting in the cycle, *The Briar Wood*, portrays a Knight's discovery of sleeping soldiers, completely entwined by the barbed thorns of the Briar rose.

Used as a dumping ground by the farmer who owned it previously, Sissinghurst's garden is portrayed by Vita Sackville-West as a Modernist version of the fairytale: a 'tangle of Binweed, Nettles, and Ground-elder' muddled up with 'old bedsteads, old plough-shares, old Cabbage stalks, old broken-down earth closets, old matted wire, and mountains of sardine tins'.[3]

The site's history spanned several centuries, producing a rich compost in the mode of a palimpsest. Once a Saxon pig farm, it would have been originally called 'Saxenhurst' – 'hurst' meaning woodland. The buildings dating from Tudor times were later used as a prison for up to 3,000 French sailors who were captured by the British during the Seven Years War, between 1756–63. The prison transformed into a poor house for the able-bodied in 1796, with inmates working the farm.

Influenced by an Arts & Crafts vision of the garden, Vita Sackville-West likewise considered the interior and exterior as a continuum: 'Shape, in a garden, is so important, if we regard, as I think we should, gardening as an extension of architecture; in other words, the garden as an outdoor extension of the house. Gardening is endlessly experimental, and that is the fun of it. You go on trying and trying, testing and testing, and sometimes you have failures but sometimes you have successes which more than make up for the failures.'[4]

Her garden, and therefore home, was open to friends but also crowds of visitors from the late 1930s, with an admission fee of one shilling. While Sissinghurst Castle Garden continues to be open to the public, under management by the National Trust, it has necessarily evolved since its former occupants' departure. Facilitated access to Vita Sackville-West's catalogue of printed works and subsequent secondary literature further guide the experience of the place. What follows is a situated understanding of the legacy and relevance today of Vita Sackville-West's garden and writings, explored with the freedom of a psychogeographical journey.



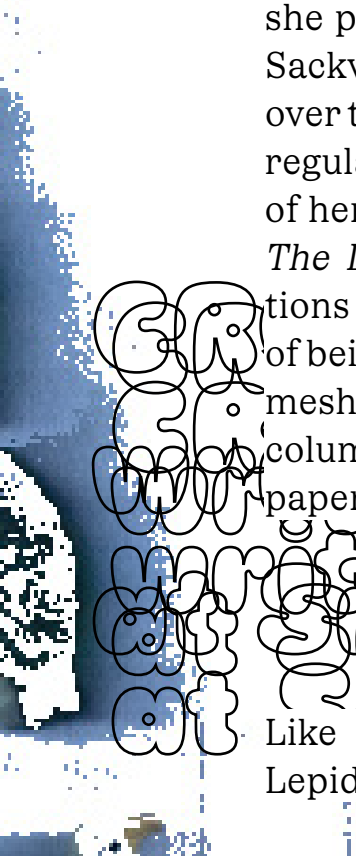
CRO 8 writing and gardening at Sissinghurst

Looking out from the window of Vita Sackville-West's writing room, at the top of the single remaining standing tower of the original Tudor building, plants cohabit with crumbling pink brick walls below. Scents arise, branches crackle, and leaves flutter against the wind. The vista illustrates Virginia Woolf's appreciation of the task of modern writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Defining a period of transition and change, her essay 'The Leaning Tower' (1940) posits that: 'If politics were "real", the ivory tower was an escape from "reality". That explains the curious... language in which so

much of this leaning-tower prose and poetry is written. It is not the rich speech of the aristocrat: it is not the racy speech of the peasant. **It is betwixt and between. The poet is a dweller in two worlds, one dying, the other struggling to be born.'**[5]

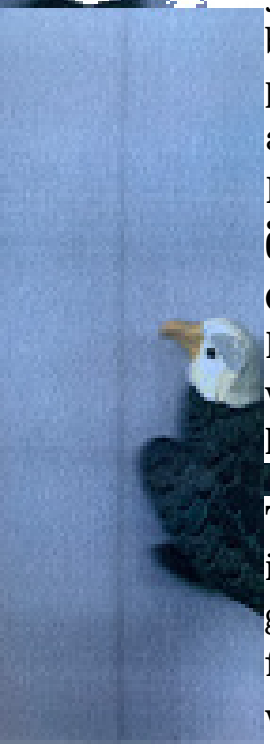
This liminal zone is precisely where Vita Sackville-West intervened as a writer, nourished by her experiments in garden design and planting. Everyday observations of her surroundings are worked into analogies across literary forms, her bibliography spanning poetry, biography, family history, and fiction. She tends to confront quintessential genres, as for example the "roman à clé" which she adopts for her second novel *The Challenge*.[6] Its subject is her male alter-ego, Julian, a Byronic hero tormented by his quest for love set against a political backdrop of revolt on a Greek island. This conventional format is quickly set aside, however, in favour of a more fragmented mode that produces a kaleidoscopic self-portrait spread across her work. In this sense, Vita Sackville-West can be considered a proto-autofictional writer[7], whose production functions as various extensions of herself. This theory can be expanded to include her activity as a gardener, in order to contend that Sissinghurst is likewise a reflection of her.

Similarly to the different plant lifecycles that cohabit in Sissinghurst Castle garden, the length of time spent on a piece, or speed of writing, varied across the different genres she practised.[8] The literary rendering of the relationship Vita Sackville-West cultivated with nature took on various forms over the years – from her early poem *The Garden* (1915), with its regular metre and rhyme scheme that described the escapism of her first garden in Istanbul; via the cathartic Georgic poem *The Land* (1926), that celebrated the rural landscape, traditions and history of Kent while expunging the disappointment of being disinherited from her childhood home Knole; to lastly, mesh with the pragmatism and friendly banter of her advice column 'In Your Garden', published monthly in national newspaper *The Observer* from 1946 to 1961.



Writing and Gardening at Sissinghurst

Like a flyway butterfly, Vita Sackville-West escapes the Lepidopterist's attempt to pin its subject down for study and



display. This message is conveyed in the guise of her character Helen Temple, in the dystopian science-fiction novel *Grand Canyon* that imagines a world in which the Nazi party have won the Second World War. Published in 1942, the intrigue is set in a Hotel at the top of the Arizonian landmark where two strangers are united by their memories of a lost England, alongside a variety of displaced Europeans and naive American youths: '"Are you a novelist?" he asked her. He had never known a novelist but had heard of their cynical ways and became suddenly suspicious lest a woman he liked might be using life in the hotel as Copy. .... He was relieved when she frankly laughed. "No, I'm not a novelist," she said. **"Sink your suspicions into a grave. I've never written a word of fiction in my life** and am not likely to begin now. In spite of that, or perhaps because of that, I am a punctual woman. Do you not think that we should now return to the hotel in time for dinner?"'[9]

The imaginary is associated with the tangible, producing the illusion of the mundane, in the manner of a seductive and dangerous perfume. Vita Sackville-West's identity is constantly in flux, as for example in her 1st January 1956 garden column, where she claims: **'I profess to be nothing more than the average gardener,** enjoying such useless but charming bits of information as that some butterflies and moths exude the same scent as the flowers they visit; that white flowers are the most numerous among the scented kinds ... that flowers fertilized by birds have no scent at all ... that some flowers smell different in the morning from in the evening; and, finally, that the flower-like scent so often observed emanating from the dead bodies of saintly persons **may be due to the same breaking-down or release of essential oils in the first stages of decomposition.'**[10]

Scent is a recurring trope that contributes to linking the interior to the outside, and the printed page. Vita Sackville-West includes the legendary Knole pot-pourri recipe, made every summer since 1750, in her family history *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922): 'Gather dry, Double Violets, Rose Leaves, Lavender, Myrtle flowers, Verbena, Bay leaves, Rosemary, Balm, Musk, Geranium. Pick these from the stalks and dry on paper in the sun for a day or two before putting them in a jar. ... Keep a new wooden spoon to stir the salt and flowers from the bottom... Have ready of spices, plenty of Cinnamon, Mace,

Nutmeg, and Pepper and Lemon-peel pounded. ... Orris toor ... Storax .. Gum Benjamin ... Calamino Aromatico ... Musk, and a small quantity of oil of Rhodium.'[11]

The online inventory of the contents of Sissinghurst Castle suggests that the author preferred the English Flower perfumes by the House of Floris. Her sophisticated, yet lonely character, Rose, in the novel *The Easter Party* (1953) shares this taste.[12] Like the changing nature of smells invoked in her garden column, Rose's floral scent is associated with a veil of cigarette smoke: 'She went and sat on the arm of Lucy's chair, putting her arm round her sister's shoulders. In the other hand she held her constant cigarette in the long holder, stretching it away from her so that the smoke should not blow back into Lucy's eyes. Even into this gesture she contrived to put the fluent grace that Lucy envied.'[13]

This beguiling smokey trail transforms into the jittery flight of an insect spotted from the author's window: 'As a rule I do not much care for bluebottles, but when I heard one buzzing out of season, on the window-pane, it reminded me of bees, making that fat heavy sound, half-somnolent and half-active, which is the very essence of summer. So slight a thing can suffice to carry one away, whether it is a sound, or a smell, or a touch. I listened to my bluebottle and, forgetting the mist creeping coldly up from the valley, I opened a nice little book ... written by a very brave lady who stuffs bees by the handful into her stocking in order to test the effect of their stings on her rheumatism.'[14]

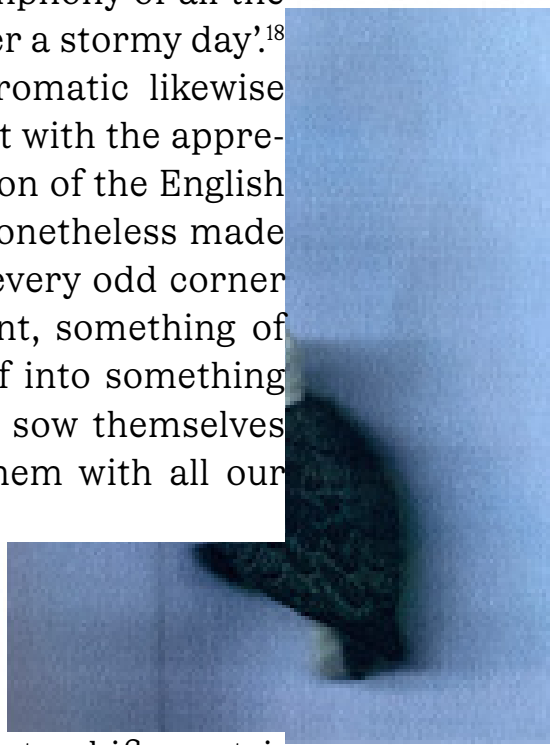
Crooked Rows: Writing and Remembering at Sissinghurst

Ambiguity affects the other senses, as most evident in Vita Sackville-West's relationship with colour and sight. Sissinghurst Castle garden is famous for its monochromatic garden "rooms" – the term the author used to refer to the different sections built on the layout of the ruins. The first of these was her White Garden: 'For my own part, I am trying to make a grey, green, and white garden. This is an experiment which I ardently hope may be successful, though I doubt it. One's best ideas seldom play up in practice to one's expectations, especially in gardening, where everything looks so well on paper and in the catalogues, but fails so lamentably in fulfilment after you have tucked your plants into the soil. All the same, I cannot help hoping that the great ghostly barn-owl will sweep silently across a pale garden,

next summer, in the twilight – the pale garden that I am now planting, under the first flakes of snow.'[16]

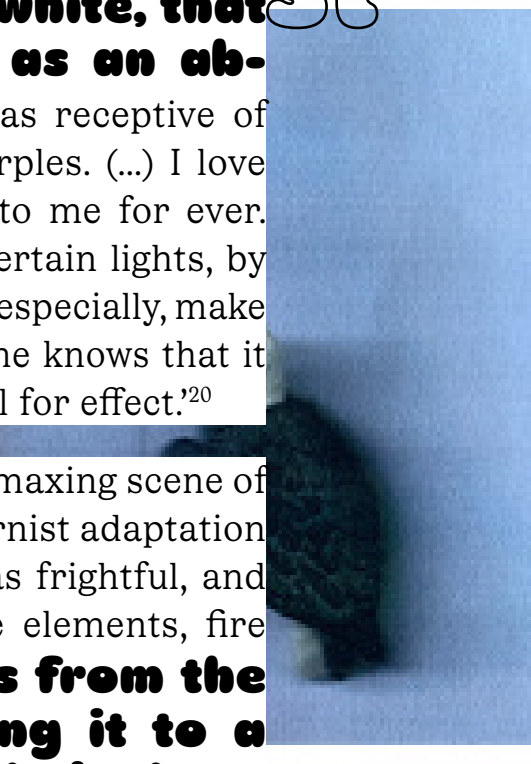
The spectral encounter between the nocturnal bird and the symphony of whiteish tones, introduces a composite and mediated relationship with colour. This is echoed in her novel Seducers in Ecuador (1924), whose protagonist Arthur Lomax views the world through tinted glasses: **'The world was changed for him, and, had he but known it, the whole of his future altered, by those two circles of blue glass.** ... Whether he pushed the glasses up on to his forehead ... he confronted unaided the too realistic glare of the Egyptian sun. When, however, he readjusted them ... he immediately re-entered the curious world so recently become his own. It was more than curious; it was magical. **A thick green light shrouded everything, the sort of light that might be the forerunner of some undreamed-of-storm, or hang between a dying sun and a dead world.'**[17]

The notion of storm is similarly introduced in Vita Sackville-West's definition of the colour-range of Sissinghurst's cottage garden, which she described in 1952 as 'a symphony of all the wild sunset colours, a sort of western sky after a stormy day'.[18] This overflowing approach to the monochromatic likewise translates to her mode of planting. Consistent with the appreciation for an effect of wildness in the tradition of the English Garden, the artifice of cultivated nature is nonetheless made evident: 'The one thing I feel sure of is that every odd corner should be packed with something permanent, something of interest and beauty, something tucking itself into something else in the natural way of plants when they sow themselves and combine as we never could combine them with all our skill and knowledge.'[19]



The perception of colour and form continue to shift, contributing to the recurring trope of the real vs. the unreal in Vita Sacvkille-West's work. This features both in her non-fiction and fictional writings, contributing to a blurring of boundaries. For instance, in her garden column on 25th April 1954:

‘There comes a moment of twilight when white plants gleam with a peculiar pallor or ghostliness. I dare to say of white, that neutral tint usually regarded as an absence of colour, that it is every bit as receptive of changing light as the blues and reds and purples. (…) I love colour, and rejoice in it, but white is lovely to me for ever. The ice-green shades that it can take on in certain lights, by twilight or by moonlight, perhaps by moonlight especially, make a dream of the garden, an unreal vision, yet one knows that it isn’t unreal at all because one has planted it all for effect.’[20]



Colour contributes to a similar effect in the climaxing scene of her novel *The Easter Party*, producing a Modernist adaptation of the Romantic sublime: ‘Anstey burnt. It was frightful, and magnificent … The beauty and terror of the elements, fire and gale savaging this home… **The flames from the house lit up the grass, turning it to a viridescent green, like bad technicolour,** and turned the rhododendrons into bushes of unreal … red. It is all unreal, though Rose; it cannot be true; and yet it is all more true than anything I have ever known.’[21]

The destructive force of the house fire conjunctly spares ‘a greenfinch’s nest in the ceanothus of the west wall’ of Walter’s room, who reports that ‘the bird is still quietly sitting’. Of all the material possessions, only one survives, transformed: **‘Look, it is one of those Wedgewood (sic.) urns that used to stand on the mantelpiece in the hall; it is not even chipped, and it has become entirely coated in molten glass.** See, it is intact inside its transparent covering; you can see the pattern and the colours.’[22]

The characters’ response to the wreckage is oddly pragmatic, reflective of the dark witty undercurrent in Vita Sackville-West’s work: ‘Well, my dear’, he said, ‘there seems little left for us to do but to contemplate the ruins of our home.’ She could not trust herself to make anything but practical remarks. ‘I suppose we must think about getting back to London. There seems no point in remaining here. Will you come with me in my car?’[23]

This brings us back full circle to Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson’s first appreciation of the ruinous potential

of Sissinghurst, with as parting words, her contention that:
'The true gardener must be brutal, and imaginative for the future.'[24]

1) Anne Scott-James, *Sissighurst: The Making of a Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), p. 17
2) Vita Sackville-West, 'The gardens at Sissinghurst Castle, Cranbrook, Kent', *The Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* 78 (November 1953), pp. 400-8, quoted in Scott-James (1974), p. 37
3) ibidem
4) Vita Sackville-West, *Even More For Your Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2004/1955), p. 159
5) Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays: Volume II* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 176
6) Written in 1920, in the manner of a duet, as transpires from her correspondence with her friend and then-lover, the author Violet Trefusis; the novel was pulled from print at the last minute following opposition from Lady Sackville-West; issued in 1923 in the United States, and finally published in England in 1974.
7) The term "autofiction" was coined in 1977 by the French literary critic and novelist Serge Doubrovsky in relation to his novel *Fils*. It is defined by the use of the third-person pronoun for a fictionalised autobiographical work, a practice which predates the 1970s and has enjoyed a contemporary revival, but which has not been theorised to date in relation to Vita Sackville-West's work.
8) Nigel Nicolson, 'Foreword', in ed. Robert Cross, *Vita Sackville-West: a bibliography* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, New Castkem Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 1999), p. vii
9) Vita Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon* (London: Michael Joseph, 1942), p. 25
10) Vita Sackville-West, *More For Your Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2004/1955), p. 16
11) V. Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: William Heinemann, 1922), p. 172
12) Vita Sackville-West, *The Easter Party* (London: Michael Joseph, 1953), p. 57
13) ibid, p. 32
14) V. Sackville-West, *More For Your Garden* (2004), pp. 166-7
15) Vita Sackville-West expanded on the heritage of garden designers of the 19th century, such as William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll, who had initiated the idea of gardens devoted to flowers of one colour or of one season that emerged in the early 20th century.
16) Vita Sackville-West, *Garden Book: A Collection Taken from In Your Garden, In Your Garden Again, More For Your Garden, Even More For Your Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968), p. 16
17) Vita Sackville-West, *Seducers in Ecuador and The Heir* (Bath: Chivers Press; Thorndike, Maine: Thorndike Press, 1995/1924, 1922), pp. 3-4
18) Vita Sackville-West and Sarah Raven, *Vita Sackville-West's Sissinghurst: The Creation of a Garden* (London: Virago Press, 2014), p. 86
19) Sackville-West, *Even More For Your Garden* (2004), p. 75
20) Sackville-West, *More For Your Garden* (2004), p. 69
21) Sackville-West, *Even More For Your Garden* (2004), p. 214
22) ibid, p. 232
23) ibid, p. 234
24) Sackville-West, *More For Your Garden* (2004), p. 99

Claire FitzGerald is an Anglo-Swiss art historian and curator. Her PhD thesis (University of Warwick, 2012–16) addressed the reinsertion, within art history, of artistic practices by women artists of the Birmingham School of Arts & Crafts. Since entering the museum field in 2016, she has notably worked as a curator for the Government Art Collection (GAC) in London (2018–21). In 2023, she joined the jury for the City of Geneva's Berthoud, Lissignol-Chevalier and Galland bursaries. She is an MA guest lecturer in the visual arts department at the Ecole Cantonale d'art de Lausanne (ECAL), with a seminar-workshop on the theme of "Writing in the English Garden" (2023–). She was nominated head curator of the Ariana Museum in March 2024.

ECHOES, booklet 7
August 2024

Graphic design by Pauline Mayor
Proofreading & corrections: Stephan Steiner

Published by WOMB
13 rte des Jeunes
1227 Les Acacias
in@joyfully-waiting.ch

JOYFULLY WAITING is an online platform of sound works made by artists.

This project is supported by Ville de Genève, Canton de Genève, la Loterie Romande, Inarema, Fondation Ernst et Olga Gubler-Hablützel and Ville de Lancy.

www.joyfully-waiting.ch