Within Living Memory: Vita Sackville-West's Poems of Land and Garden

Author(s): Elizabeth W. Pomeroy

Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Autumn, 1982, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 269-289

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/441179

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Twentieth Century Literature*

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Within Living Memory: Vita Sackville-West's Poems of Land and Garden

ELIZABETH W. POMEROY

Of all her abundant writings, Vita Sackville-West valued her poetry most. She favored it above her novels, biographies, country and garden notes, even the history of her beloved Knole. Her longest poem, *The Land,* was published in 1926 to considerable praise. (Virginia Woolf wrote to her, "Yes: that yellow moon is rising on the horizon—Everyone admiring Vita, talking of Vita."[1]) In that year it won the Hawthornden Prize and attracted a readership that has lasted through twenty-two reprintings in England. The poem of 2500 lines, divided into sections for the four seasons, implies historical distance stretching back behind the particulars of country life. Its poetry is as rich and uneven as the landscape itself. Twenty years later in 1946 came *The Garden,* a little shorter, also divided into seasons. Here her imagination is reined a little closer in, making a poem more personal and less sweeping, in places alive with the flowers of her own garden at Sissinghurst. This poem was awarded the Heinemann prize.

The art of memory, invented in classical times and passed down through the Renaissance, offers a fascinating key to these two poems. This ancient way, uncovered in rich detail by Frances Yates, is built upon places and images.[2] The places, or memory *loci,* must be spaces easily grasped by the memory, such as rooms in a house or parts of a geometrical design. The images are visible forms or signs of what we aim to remember. The process of the mnemonic training is then to form the *loci* clearly in the mind, set into them the images wanted, and later, revisit the places, demanding from each the item it contains. Intense concentration and a keen visual imagination are needed; presumably these can both be developed by practicing the art. Detailed "rules" are offered by the three earliest writers on the topic, Cicero,

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Quintilian, and the unknown author of the *Ad Herennium.* For example, the spaces must not be too much alike, and they must be neither too shadowy nor too brightly lit. It is an extraordinary notion of the mind's eye, reading off a sequence of images as one reads the string of words on a printed page.

There is a further division of the "images" into two kinds: one for "things" (including arguments or ideas) and one for "words." A student of classical rhetoric could thus arrange and memorize the ideas of his speech or, by heroic effort, even its precise terms. We recognize the still familiar mnemonic device of associating a visual image with a person's name, or remembering an idea when we return to the place we first thought of it, as though it had been "left" there waiting for us. This elementary framework of the art of memory developed, in the Renaissance, into a most complex architecture of thought, touching philosophy, art, and science.

In Sackville-West's poems, the memory scheme captures her experience in a related way, recording the activities and language of rural life before they were lost to modern changes. The four seasons become her memory places. Into each she sets the work of men and the events of nature, where they belong (the precise time to cut hay, the bloomtime of the fritillaries). She saw clearly that the ways of country life, undisturbed for centuries, were threatened by encroaching land development, social change, and finally war. Her two long poems not only serve to confirm personal memories, but to give some permanence to ancient ways quickly disappearing—ways she instinctively felt were at the heart of the English character. With her ear for language, she adds an abundance of curious words to her structure of "places"—words obsolete, invented, prickly, tart, a highly personal mixture of archaic and local terms. The whole effect, especially in *The Land,* is as motley and alive as a perennial border (in which some weeds are accepted too, if they are picturesque). The energy of the poems is the desire to preserve in memory all these things that are past or passing.

The repetition of the seasons is a mnemonic device in nature itself. With seasons as her *loci* she links her poetic record to a cycle that will automatically be repeated. These "places" actually revisit *us,* carrying their freight of memories. After years of close observation, the season remains the one constant in her recollections:

> There were so many days that I was given.
> But whether of this spring or that? they merge
> As travelling clouds across my permanent heaven.
> (*L,* p. 55)

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

She celebrates this continuity, which includes human work yet goes far deeper, in the opening lines of *The Land*:

> I sing the cycle of my country's year,
> I sing the tillage, and the reaping sing,
> Classic monotony, that modes and wars
> Leave undisturbed . . .
>
> I sing once more
> The mild continuous epic of the soil,
> Haysel and harvest, tilth and husbandry.
> (*L*, p. 3)

He sang the cycle of his country's year.
He sang the tillage, and the reaping sang,
Classic monotony, that modes and wars
Left undisturbed, unbettered, for their best
Was born immediate, of expediency.
The sickle sought no art, the axe, the share,
Draped no superfluous beauty round their steel.
The scythe had sought no music for her stroke,
Her stroke sufficed in music, as her blade
Laid low the swathes; the scythesman swept, nor reed
What crop had ripened, whether maize in Greece,
Or oats in Kent; the shepherd on the ridge
Like his Boeotian forbear kept his flocks;
And still their profiles on a tenderer sky
Simple and classic reared their grave design
As once in Thrace, as once in Tuscany.

He sang once more
The mild continuous epic of the soil,
Haysel and harvest tilth and husbandry

Opening lines from the first draft of V. Sackville-West's poem *The Land* [HM 41088]

Reproduced by permission from the original manuscript in the Huntington Library.

The Huntington Library holds a fine collection of the manuscripts and corrected proofs of these two works. It is just such a cache of background as one would hope to find for any admired poem. The

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

material shows clearly her process, storing up images and words, designing the "places" for them, then arranging the images in a pattern for memory to recall. Her result, of course, is not the classic simplicity of one image in each space, but rather a profusion; so wide a freedom does she allow herself in the amplitude of her framework, the four seasons.

First, *The Land.* Her first draft was written in a large notebook, 139 pages of material with many entries dated, between June 6, 1923, and March 27, 1926. Toward the end she also frequently noted places—Tehran, Ispahan—sometimes in pencil on a penned page, as though added later. (Nigel Nicolson wrote to me, "I was struck, on re-reading, how much she added when she was travelling in India and Persia in 1926."[3]) This document is fascinating as a kind of "primeval chaos" of much substance, yet unformed, which eventually became the poem. It contains no title, and no division into seasons. There is only a hint—one or two terms—of the topical subheadings in the final poem ("The Weald of Kent," "Bee Master," "Woodcraft." Eventually there were forty-five.) Hardly a single page of the manuscript proceeds as in the printed text, entire sections being shifted back and forth in later versions. She occasionally takes up a section pages later and reworks it, marking the cross-reference for herself at the top of the pages concerned. The manuscript is not so much a draft as it is a collection of poetic ideas, a combination of scraps, sparks, and shards of the poem.

On a page dated October 11, 1925, she has begun to think of proportions, jotting line-count figures identified as autumn, winter, spring, summer. She lists about a dozen such sets of four, each with different counts, perhaps beginning to choose passages to fit into each season. (The final text reaches this balance: Winter 22 pages, Spring 26, Summer 22, Autumn 20.) The manuscript contains about twenty percent more material than the final poem, some of it quite unrelated. The odd pieces are also of interest as topics intervening during her long work on *The Land.* There is a passage contrasting two of her dogs, a comic piece on some monkeys in an exotic lost city, a ponderous lengthy piece entitled "Black Tarn," three little quatrains on Mary Stuart. Striking, and linked with *The Land,* is a verse dialogue exactly in the manner of Robert Frost, between two farmers who exchange country news in a laconic style. She has dated this and marked it "verbatim." Was it an actual conversation overheard, in which her ear caught the natural blank-verse rhythm?

On the first three pages of this notebook, she has freely jotted

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

names, images, and bits of quotes. Here she shows her fascination with the local vernacular:

"Though mine English be sympill to mine entent,
Have/Hold me excused, for I was born in Kent"
15th cent. poem, M.S. at Oxford,
written in Kent

"He was patched, torn, & all to-rent.
It seemed by his language that he was born in Kent."
From 'How the ploughman learned his paternoster'

In the margins or scribbled among the notes are these: "Sir T. Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica"—"Campion, Observations in the Art of English Poesy"—"Samuel Daniel, Defence of Rhyme." Further on is this thought (warning?): "Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. Shelley" And these jottings:

"Or as when a bird hath flown through the air
There is no token of her flight to be found"
Wisdom of Solomon

"And run to and fro like sparks among the stubble"
Wisdom of Solomon

All of these give some clue to her thoughts.

We see her collecting topics for later use, listing little stockpiles of them ("Badgers," "hop garden," "Andredsweald"—the ancient forest of Kent). She scatters words and definitions ("teinage=brushwood in fences [Kent]" or "groundstalworth=strongly and firmly fixed in the ground"). She tries out the rhythm of a phrase: "Black wedge of yews" and "Now let your spade be sharp." In the revised passages that follow, she occasionally hears the rhythm of a line clearly and only alters words. A striking example is the line "Escape of spirit from the mould of shape," changed to the final "Release of spirit from the jail of shape." (It is the exact cadence of Shakespeare's sonnet 129, "Expense of spirit in a waste of shame." She heard this, too, no doubt, aware as she was of the hidden force of one's past reading. Here the unconscious, rather than deliberate, memory almost works against the creative process.[4])

Her revisions continue through the other stages of the text. In the Huntington Library are the draft she prepared for her typist (Spring and Winter sections only) and two sets of proofs, each with her corrections. In the draft for the typist, she has culled passages from her

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

notebook and arranged them into the poem as we have it. The seasonal framework is established. Of much importance for her final effect, she has shifted many verb tenses from past to present, and has changed third person to first. A notable case is her opening "apology" for her theme, which became "I sing the cycle of my country's year" and "The country habit has me by the heart." At many points she sharpens detail; for example, a passage of landscape description mentioning only a meadow, coppice, and stream becomes "Lord's Meadow," "Scallop's Coppice," and "the Eden passing by a mill." We catch the odd charm of a British ordnance survey map, with the survival of so many ancient place names, put into poetry.

She has added a title page, showing WORK struck out in favor of HUSBANDRY, and including the epigram she chose from Virgil's *Georgics*: "Nec sum animi dubius, verbis ea vincere magnum / quam sit et angustis hunc addere rebus honorem" (Book III, 289–90), with the translation: "Well I know how hard it is to win with words a triumph / herein, and thus to crown with glory a lowly theme."

The first proof shows still more changes, and more asked for. She has inserted entire new passages, and has transported some from one place to another. She seems to have thought of italics, as a way of setting off segments of the poem, after seeing the first printed version; this she marks for italicized sections here and there. Many subheadings are changed or added, and she is still refining words. For example, she responds to Virginia Woolf's advice, "I wish you'd not say 'profile' on the first page; it's not right there: outline—something English would be better there."[5] The change resulted in this evocation of a classical frieze:

> . . . the shepherd on the ridge
> Like his Boeotian forebear kept his flocks,
> And still their outlines on our tenderer sky
> Simple and classic rear their grave design
> As once at Thebes, as once in Lombardy.

An interesting surprise is a line from Hesiod's *Works and Days,* given in Greek, added to the quotation from Virgil. The Hesiod may be translated "Work is no disgrace; the disgrace is in not working."[6] The line is dropped out in the final proof and published text, but the two classical precursors remain in the spirit of the poem.

The final proofs show Sackville-West still at work. This time the conclusion has twenty-six lines beyond the ending of the first proofs,

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and she has penned above "Print amended version sent on separate sheet." In the published version we find lines taken from that thicket of a first draft, now set at the ending. They return to the classical inspiration in lines she wrote far from Kent, marking them "Ispahan, April 1926":

> Then thought I, Virgil! how from Mantua reft
> Shy as a peasant in the courts of Rome
> Thou took'st the waxen tablets in thy hand,
> And out of anger cut calm tales of home.

The language of this poem is of great interest, on several grounds. The drafts and proofs document Sackville-West's preoccupation with words, not only as poetic diction but as sparks of human expression on a continuum of very rapid change. Sometimes her instinct seems to be an anthropologist's, recording bits of dialect before London English spreads across rural Kent to snuff them out. But also her impulse is a poet's, relishing words for their sounds in combination, calculating the little jar of coming upon an unfamiliar word. Thus language becomes an essential part of the memory record created in the poem.

She recognized the difficulty of keeping words alive in any artificial or literary way, much as she regretted losing them. She wrote in one of her Country Notes:

> How much one regrets that local turns of speech should be passing away! There was a freshness and realism about them which kept the language alive and can never be replaced. Imported into prose they become fossilized and affected, for, accurately reported though they may be in those novels of rural life of which one grows so tired, the spontaneity and even the accent are lacking; imported into poetry, they instantly sound like the archaisms of a poetic convention.

Such speech had "a proverbial ring: 'He talks too much—talk and do never did lie down together.' I do not see where we are to find such refreshing imagery in future, unless, indeed, we look to America where the genius of the vivid phrase still seems to abide."[7] (That very aphorism of talking and doing appears in the Frost-like verse dialogue of her first-draft manuscript.)

In response to my inquiry, Nigel Nicolson, the poet's son, generously joined my investigation of this language by consulting two farmer friends in the Kentish weald, one of them aged ninety. He tried on them a sampling of words from the poem. These turned out to be some distinctly Kentish and still in use, some deliberately archaic, some

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

country terms but not specifically local, some obsolete since their use by Hardy or Dickens. A number of the terms were completely unknown to his informers, suggesting that they were already gone when Sackville-West was writing in the twenties. Some resisted pursuit entirely. About "winsel" Nigel Nicolson wrote: "Defeats us. Not in OED, not known to my farmers."[8] (But there it is, in the margin of her first draft: "winsel= unexpected profit." Where did she find it?)

Just a few examples must suffice to show how she weaves these curious words into her web. In the Winter section, in the space of two pages (*L*, pp. 20–21) are these passages:

> Now in the wolf-month, shrammed and gaunt,
> When vixens prowl, and hopping birds grow bold,
> And craven otters haunt
> The coops, by famine driven, and by cold

(*"shrammed"*—numbed or paralyzed with cold; out of use since Hardy's poetry, but suggesting here the force of a blow dealt by winter)

> All desultory tasks, while the short day
> Dulls from the morning's red to undern grey,
> And dyes to red again as sun sinks low.

(*"undern"*—as Nicolson writes, "mid-afternoon. Not used since c. 1880, but adopted by Vita and Virginia Woolf in their private correspondence. 'See you undern. . . .' " The word, odd though it is, marvelously suits the sound of the passage, with its repeated d's, and even tricks the eye with a sense of "under" and heaviness as the winter day sinks.)

> In the dark shippon tranquil cattle crush
> Sweet cake, sliced mangold; shift, and blow, and champ;
> In the dark stable tired horses stamp,
> And nuzzle at the manger for their feed.

(*"shippon"*—a cattle shed. Used by Dickens and apparently, according to the Sissinghurst farmers, now just slipping away as it is still, though rarely, used. *"mangold"*—a variety of beet, the word now out of use. Again, these words serve to knit up the web of sound more tightly—shippon-shift, mangold-manger—while conveying a sense of timelessness in this bit of farm life.)

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

These examples have their parallel on every page of her poem. And they illustrate the suppleness and nice variety she could achieve in the pentameter line, although a reader who presses too closely for exact meaning will be brought up short a hundred times when coming to the curious words. The essential thing is to read onward, hearing the sounds, sensing the implications from the context, being carried by her rhythms, which are often managed with consummate skill. The effect rises from the lines and maintains its hold. Definitions hardly matter in lines like these, expressing the bond between the land and the yeomen who

> ... felt their boots so heavy and so swere
> With trudging over cledgy lands,
> Held fast by earth, being to earth so near.
> (*L*, p. 25)

Nigel Nicolson gives some further hints of her sources for language in *The Land.* Much of her agricultural information came from an encyclopedia of farming given to her by her husband Harold Nicolson (for she possessed little knowledge of farming). And some of her vivid descriptions came from direct observation of the farm animals:

> "Their shining shoes strike fire on errant flints" ... One can imagine her, season by season, going down to the farm to watch a particular process, and then return to Long Barn to turn it into words. I often accompanied her on such trips, and though she did not take notes, I would see her go straight to her study on our return, and tell us she was not to be interrupted. I was only 8 years old at that time.[9]

Contrasting with the severity of human toil are descriptions of nature's abundance, relying on oddities of language this time for a lighter effect:

> Of campion and the little pimpernel;
> Of kexen parsley and the varied vetch;
> Of the living mesh, cats-cradle in a ditch;
> Of gorse and broom and shins;
> Of hops and buckwheat and the wild woodbine
> That with their stems must twine
> Like the way of the sun to left from right;
> Of berried bindweeds, twisting widdershins;
> Of all the tangle of the hedgerow, laced
> With thorny dog-rose and the deadly dwale
> (*L*, p. 47)

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Altogether the language of the poem is a highly personal mixture. Although sometimes mannered and obscure, the style often returns to such directness as this

> My life was rich; I took a swarm of bees
> And found a crumpled snake-skin on the road,
> All in one day, and was increased by these.
> (*L*, p. 55)

In creating her memory record, Sackville-West shares some themes with the two predecessors inscribed in her drafts, Virgil and Hesiod. The *Georgics, Works and Days,* and *The Land* all celebrate the dignity of labor and the bond between mankind and the earth. The two classical poems make a context for *The Land*; exploring their interrelationships throws our poet's distinctiveness into higher relief.

Virgil's *Georgics* is divided into four books, not by seasons but by areas of work: tillage, planting, farm animals, beekeeping. The writing of the poem had been preceded by a century of war and disturbance, hence its appeal, both national and personal, to renew the stabilizing and life-giving work of agriculture. C. Day Lewis, writing his translation of the *Georgics* during the Second World War, sensed the same timeless motives which had energized *The Land* as a postwar poem:

> I felt more and more of the kind of patriotism which I imagine was Virgil's—the natural piety, the heightened sense of the genius of the place, the passion to praise and protect one's roots, or to put down roots somewhere while there is still time, which it takes a seismic event such as war to reveal to most of us rootless persons.[10]

It is remarkable that three translations of the *Georgics* appeared in English in the 1940s (Day Lewis', 1940; R. C. Trevelyan's, 1944; L. A. S. Jermyn's, 1947) and two in France in that decade. For Virgil, the patriotic return to the land was tied to major political and social ideas of the forthcoming Augustan age, ideas directly treated in the poem. In *The Land,* politics and war do not appear. Sackville-West's view is fixed on the present, which becomes a memory record for reflection, yielding action only if it stirs a response.

Both poets express patriotism in part through contrast with exotic lands. In the *Georgics* the passage on beekeeping draws in the strong scents and colors of Attic flower hillsides, of Egypt and Persia. Sackville-West, who loved to contemplate her own ancestry of English gentry contrasted with gypsy blood, seizes the bee opportunity for this choice little set piece (like a Persian miniature painting):

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

I have known bees within the ruined arch
Of Akbar's crimson city hang their comb;
Swarm in forsaken courts in a sultry March,
Where the mild ring-doves croon, and small apes play,
And the thin mangy jackal makes his home;
And where, the red walls kindling in the flares,
Once the great Moghul lolling on his throne,
Between his languid fingers crumblind spice,
Ordered his women to the chequered squares,
And moved them at the hazard of the dice.
(*L,* p. 40)

She returned to this definition-by-contrast countless times in her writings, as in an essay on Kent written in an African town where she found "everything was definite, extravagant, violent. There was no such thing as the compromise of the dove-grey English skies, the mellow English fields, the reserved and measured English character that matched them."[11] The editor of *English Country,* this collection of essays on counties, puts down her views to "the obstinate separatism of Kentish rusticity" (p. xvi). But she is simply putting her patriotism into local terms best known to her.

Both these poets stress the peace and elemental justice of the countryside. Here, says Virgil, Justice set her last footprints as she passed away from the earth. Both give much practical information on tools, techniques like crop rotation, names of particular plants—she especially making poetry of the mundane abundance which struck Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough; / And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim."

Sackville-West announces her theme as "the mild continuous epic of the soil." In this way she signals her intention of high seriousness and her hope of touching somehow the essential spirit of the nation. Her poem ends with a vision of a classical harvest time and an invocation of "the Mantuan," who honored these rural scenes in his own georgics. The epigram she has chosen from Virgil recalls the difficulty of writing with glory about so lowly a theme, but she frames this apology:

Why then in little meadows hedge about
A poet's pasture? shed a poet's cloak
For fustian? cede a birthright, thus to map
So small a corner of so great a world?

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Her reply:

> 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.
> (*L,* pp. 5–6)

For both poets stars, seasons, and earth move in concert, and human activity must take its cues from this natural world. Sackville-West writes that when the plovers and the ragged daws wheel and settle, it is time to plough; Virgil finds ploughing season when Libra (the Scales) has made daylight and darkness equal in hours. (Hesiod gives a beguiling example of the same sort: when the leaves of one's fig tree are as large as a crow's footprint, winter storms are past and the sea is navigable again.)

The *Georgics* and *The Land* both include portents and popular beliefs about nature, combining close observation with an irrational, even mystical, sense of universal life. While Virgil gives advice on husbandry, Sackville-West actually populates her poem with vignettes of people at work: Yeoman, bee-master, shepherd, thatcher, craftsman, and more. Despite her joy in nature, this toil is not glorified. She has met shepherds carrying one of their number dead from the hills, and an old vagrant, outcast from the cycle of labor, dies in the snow.

Finally, these two poets of the land share a historical perspective. Virgil recalls the ages of Saturn, the Sabines, Romulus and Remus and their life on this earth. Sackville-West compresses a brief history of the Andredsweald, the ancient forest of Kent, now the Weald, with its progress from wilds to cultivation, all stretching back behind the most common farm activity of the present.

Behind both these georgics, the classical and the latter-day, is Hesiod's *Works and Days,* with its dominant moral theme of the dignity of labor. Shorter than the *Georgics* (828 lines to the latter's 2188) this poem is of the Boeotian line, alluded to by Sackville-West on the first page of *The Land.* Hesiod was perhaps a younger contemporary of Homer, his *Works and Days* dating from the early seventh century.[12] Even more closely than the two later works, this one belongs to the ancient tradition of wisdom literature, here a collection of precepts within a narrative frame. It is apparently addressed to the poet's brother Perses, urging him to work and giving directions. It is not di-

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

vided into sections, but does proceed roughly through the seasons of one year. Centrally it is about deeds and behavior. The landscape setting appears only if it is being worked on or giving some sign or signal for work (when the cranes fly over, begin your planting). Although a systematic progress of ideas cannot be made out, the poem is as rich in lore, custom, and movements of the human spirit as the other two. It finds the roots of work in history, divine and mortal history interwoven in the five ages—golden, silver, brazen, the heroes, and the present iron age. This myth of beginnings is counterpoised by a prediction of a final age, in which force will destroy human society and the immortals will forsake the earth. Justice appears as a figure in the poem, active and inseparable from the concept of duty and the honor of labor. The narrative of the poem is unsettled, dynamic, as it passes from fables to divine warnings, practical advice on husbandry, or observances on ritual duties, rarely pausing for descriptive passages of the natural scene. Its continuous object seems to be the reconciliation of human energy to the gods and the earth.

All three of these poems are tuned to the same string. All relate nature's harmony to the continuance of the social fabric. In all is a zeal for work and the unglorified struggle for livelihood that would seem incompatible with a lyric voice. But Sackville-West manages to warm these themes with her delight in language and with splashes of her own temperament. Her variety of line lengths and verse forms renews interest, like unexpected turns in a long journey. Her pages are crowded with images, and she does not hesitate to gild a lily. Facing the prospect of land developers approaching from London, she fills up four seasons of poetry with words and figures to keep.

Twenty years separated *The Land* from *The Garden*. In that interval the earlier poem maintained its popularity. By 1971 it had sold an astonishing 100,000 copies in England alone.[13] How to account for the abiding interest stirred by this long poem? It was written partly in reply to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which had appeared in 1922. Set beside his poem, hers was certainly a road not taken, as far as modern literature was concerned. But the early reviews suggest reasons for its appeal. The combination of accurate detail with almost mystical sensitivity won a wide variety of readers. One of the judges for the Hawthornden Prize (an amateur field naturalist) wrote in the *Morning Post* (June 17, 1927) that he was "constantly shocked by the appalling blunders in the modern poetry on nature, but Miss Sackville-West, with all the mass of detail, never went within measurable distance of making a mistake." *The Nation and the Athenaeum* (June 25, 1927) reported "a farmer wrote

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to her to say that he didn't know anything about poetry, but he could tell her that there was nothing wrong with her agriculture." The *TLS* reviewer (October 21, 1926) gave high praise, finding that the lyrical delight was disciplined by all the detailed observance, leaving "no adventitious element . . . no easy glamour." And the *Saturday Review of Literature* (July 4, 1928) also fixed on the power in the contrast: "The stuff looks like pitchblende, but there is radium in it."

Further, the poem fell upon a time of war weariness and country-longing, combined with disturbing social changes. Virginia Woolf gives one view of the problem in her diary of 1927:

> Now let me become the annalist of Rodmell.
>
> Thirty five years ago, there were 160 families living here where there are now no more than 80. It is a decaying village, which loses its boys to the towns. Not a boy of them, said the Rev. Mr. Hawkesford, is being taught to plough. Rich people wanting week end cottages buy up the old peasants' houses, for fabulous sums.[14]

The instinct to set down history is the same instinct for preservation that is hidden in *The Land*. Woolf, responding to the poem, urged her friend to continue in a new vein:

> Begin your history of a Kentish village at once. Plan it out roughly on a great sheet: Let each little note branch and blossom in the night, or when you're walking (the beauty of this subject is that everything will come in—cabbages, moon, church steeple): Occasionally open some old history, or life of some unknown man, but not to read carefully—to dream over. So in a week—no, 3 or 4 days, the whole poem will be foaming and bubbling in your head.[15]

Sackville-West did begin a new poem, to be worked out through another wartime and finally to appear in 1946. *The Garden* was written not as annals, but rather as a talisman against darkness. Her opening lines set out this purpose:

> Small pleasures must correct great tragedies,
> Therefore of gardens in the midst of war
> I boldly tell . . .
> Yet shall the garden with the state of war
> Aptly contrast, a miniature endeavour
> To hold the graces and the courtesies
> Against a horrid wilderness . . .
> So does the gardener in little way
> Maintain the bastion of his opposition
> And by symbol keep civility.
> (*G*, pp. 13–15)

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The threat to her beloved Kent was now more imminent and violent than the misguided "progress" which was just offstage in *The Land.* She retreats to cultivate her garden and to reflect. The earlier poem had celebrated agriculture as a life-giving cycle of work. The later one describes the garden as a work of art, with all that implies.

Once again, manuscripts in the Huntington Library show clearly her process of writing. As before, she stores up images and words, finally arranging them in the "places" of the four seasons. The Huntington holds two full-length drafts of the poem, the second (the "Fair Copy") presented to the Library by Nigel Nicolson on the occasion of his visit in 1978.

The first draft is again a copious notebook, somewhat of a jumble, perhaps reflecting her habit of coming in and writing something quickly from direct observation. She writes in a brown ink that seems made from something picked in her garden. Occasional dates show in the margin, beginning with 11/42, soon skipping to '44. The first page begins with these directions: "Look up Flowers in Dictionary of phrase & fable" and "Look up Flora in Classical dictionary." The result was one of the real distinctions of the poem: the lush and sympathetic descriptions of plants that had charmed readers of her garden notes, as they appeared in periodicals for many years. No structure or divisions for the poem appear yet.

She writes out themes for the poem, under a heading of "Subjects." Some of these become central ideas in the work, others show various convictions as background.

> *General theme*: Courage in adversity. Determination to find pleasure and not to succumb.
> No sentimentality. Struggle. Weeds. Death and loss. Success and reward.
> Dislike of modern life and vulgarity. Love of the graces of life and retirement.
> The struggle to obtain any form of satisfaction is probably part of the pleasure.
>
> How passionately one minds the meanness of people, how it hurts to find that there is no generosity, only suspicion and mistrust, but how thankful one is by contrast when one finds the reverse.
>
> No vague imagination any use; must have precision and knowledge, and yet not allow them to impair sense of beauty. The connoisseur's lack of aesthetic taste. Possible to become too highbrow.

This content downloaded from 93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Further on is the heading "Practical Subjects," where she has jotted dozens of topics and images. Some are from experience: "Butterflies coming down the chimney in H's room [Harold's]" or "The way certain colours e.g. of phlox, change with the light." Others are broader subjects: "Garden design: Vistas. Surprise" or practical measures: "Scything the orchard (grass should be wet for a close cut)" [Virgil's *Georgics* says exactly the same]. Visual images are included: "Spiders' webs (like handwriting)" and "Botticelli effect of small bulbs." Reflections on the memory theme: "Escapism of gardening: walking round one's own garden in thought when absent." And for later comparisons, she lists half a dozen foreign lands with famous gardens, beginning with Persia.

A section headed "Scraps" has a collection of phrases, single lines, and short passages, to be woven in later. She criticizes herself on the grounds of precision: having compared the fallen leaves of *Prunus Sargentii* to a mint of fallen coins, she writes "This is not very exact: coins are round, the leaves of *P. Sargentii* are pointed." The sheer quantity of plants included by name in this poem is something of a marvel.

The drafting of the work proceeds with many revisions. There is very little use now of dialect or archaic words, but botanical terms often add an exotic or homely effect. Many characteristic touches appear in these lines, for example:

> Consider the Algerian iris, frail
> As tissue-paper stained in lilac-blue,
> Sprung at the foot of wall; consider too
> *Crocus Tomasianus,* small, so pale,
> Lavender cups of tiny crockery;
> The winter aconite with mint of gold
> Like new-struck coins that shame the
>   spectral sun
> Hung in our jaundiced heaven . . .
> (*G,* p. 42)

She skillfully weaves in the Latin name, fitting it into both meter and alliteration. The first draft shows here "yellow sun" and "winter heaven," later revised to the more extravagant "spectral" and "jaundiced." In the last pages of this notebook she is thinking about structure, writing in a margin: "Put the sundial part at the end of autumn i.e. the end of the whole poem."

The "fair copy" manuscript is smooth, with few corrections, but is still not the final version. The poem is still not divided into seasons.

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Large sections appear out of their final order. Perhaps she took the same steps that she had for *The Land* in a stage before the printed proof: inserting some passages, moving others, adding italics.

This fair copy includes a little dialogue with her typist here and there, as in the margin by a reference to a child who named his doll after a flower: "Elvira: this was your M.P." The last line of this draft is "Thank God that beauty walks the common way," under which she has penned in very large letters "AMEN 30–10–1945." (She had written to her husband that this poem was a much greater struggle than *The Land.*[16] For the final text, after the relief of finishing had paled, she preferred the interrogative: "How could such beauty walk the common way?") Various loose pages have been bound into this manuscript. One compares the length of *The Land* and *The Garden,* by seasons: the former poem totaling 2418 lines, the latter 2898.

Found only in the fair copy is a separate piece of fifty-three lines, in which the author and a friend—obviously Virginia Woolf—visit the offices of the *Daily Mail* to read their obituary notices. The incident is more remarkable than the poetry, as the two laugh together over these discoveries:

> An ancient house and a stately name
> For me, and a strange romantic vein
> "Spanish gypsy and Spanish duke
> Mixed with her very English strain,
> With a dash of the goat-herd Basque thrown in,
> And a few cheap novels as bad as sin,
> And some honest lines of verse."

And this:

> She was a moth that haunted the meadows
> Haunted brushing the souls of men;
> Hovering, touching, provoking, teasing,
> And was away on her flight again.
>
> No capture, no; not a candle flame
> Could singe those wings as they shivered by,
> Yet in the last grand wizening flare
> Burning/would no longer fly,
> Discarding life and their lovely rare
> Flight for the night which has no name
> But may be brighter than days we dare.

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In the final text, wartime is the background against which nature's life seems most intense. To the gardener, with her keen eye, crisis gives this revelation:

> Strange were those summers; summers filled with war.
> I think the flowers were the lovelier
> For danger.
>
> Coppices I have seen, so rudely scarred,
> With all their leaves in small confetti strown;
> The hazels blasted and the chestnut charred;
> Yet by the autumn, leaves of Spring had grown.
> How temporary, War, with all it grief!
> Permanence only lay in sap and seed.
> (*G*, pp. 90, 92)

This, she wrote elsewhere, was really the lure of country life: "the eternally renewed evidences of the determination to live," a shoot at the base of a plant thought dead.[17] *The Garden* describes the odd incongruities of war—a lark killed by a bomb, or digging trenches in the orchard and putting one's children in. But nature somehow absorbs the intrusion: the enforced blackouts coincided with long winter darkness. And ever practical, she writes in her *Country Notes in Wartime* of plants suitable for covering the mounds of air-raid shelters.[18]

In this situation, both nature and the gardener are protagonists in the renewal of life. In the poem, the gardener now appears as an artist—designing, shaping, coloring—now as a poet—scattering seeds like words—now as a god—starting up new life at will, at her potting bench. The images of her four seasons are chiefly of these two protagonists in their energy or quiet, always interacting.

The Garden begins with Winter, as does *The Land.* Once again places and images bring order to a profusion of memories. For example, recurring seasons of her life will bring back these impressions to her mind's eye:

Winter: Those ominous blackouts but also nature's darkness gentled into "this valuable and enforced retreat . . . prolonged novena" (p. 21)—a contemplative time when the gardener sits over his seed catalogs.

Spring: The germ of an idea from her notebook becomes this passage, really a blazon of weeds:

> The thistle and the groundsel with their fluff;
> The little cresses that in waste explode
> Mistaken bounty at the slightest touch;
> The couch-grass throwing roots at every node,

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

With wicked nick-names like its wicked self,
Twitch, quitch, quack, scutch;
The gothic teazle, tall as hollyhock,
Heraldic as a halberd and as tough;
The romping bindweed and the rooting dock;
The sheeny celandine that Wordsworth praised,
(He was no gardener, his eyes were raised)
(*G*, p. 70)

In the slightly wild wit of these sounds we hear her distinctive voice as a poet. This passage, also from Spring, still pursues the "fine excess," now drawing her Sissinghurst garden directly:

See, down the nut-plat, washing in a tide
That laves each inch of soil, the manifold
Wealth of the coloured primrose, thick and wide,
Butter-and-eggs, with stripes of tiger-skin,
And saffron lakes, all shot with sun, and pied,
And clumps of polyanthus laced with gold.
The leopard's camouflage, the lion's pride,
Were not more freckled, tawny, than this mob
Matted in clusters, lowly, and so dense
they hide the earth beneath their opulence.
(*G*, pp. 66–67)

Summer: For the season to prune hedges, yew and topiary, the poem describes the growth habits and literary associations of these. The hedge this time is not the marking of centuries-old ownership, as it was in *The Land,* the pattern drawn on the landscape by human use. Instead it is a major design element in a work of art, reflecting the personality of the gardener:

And since the garden's backbone is the Hedge
Shaping to seemly order, set it square,
Not in weak curves that half deny the pledge
Given to pattern in intent austere.
Gardens should be romantic, but severe.
(*G*, p. 112)

Autumn: Unlike the earlier poem. *The Garden* implies a connection between the seasons and one human lifetime. Coming to an ending, the poem takes an intensely personal turn. The dominant images are from the mottoes of sundials: "It is already later than you think . . . Of the

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

last hour beware . . . And how we go may shadow show / Sooner or later all must go." Early in her planning she had determined to end with these meditations on time. Although the recurring seasons make nature seem endless, autumn will always prefigure the end of an individual life.

The Land and *The Garden* are two poems seeking knowledge from a study of landscape. *The Land* portrays the universal life of the countryside, its details so essential to the English spirit that they even precede memory: "I tell the things I know, the things I knew / Before I knew them, immemorially" (*L,* p. 4). *The Garden* marks out an inner landscape of thought in the created world of a special garden. As the focus comes closer in, the later poem is more homogeneous in language, though vivid. The earlier work picks up a motley of country and archaic terms, in a mix unique to this poet. Sackville-West was quite conscious that her material might sometimes rule her, writing in her *Country Notes,* "I sometimes think that the love of nature and the natural seasonal life may attain the proportions of a vice; may obsess one to the extent of desiring nothing else, nothing beyond: a drowning, a lethargy, an escape, an indolence and an evasion."[19] Writing these poems meant taking arms against this oblivion in more ways than one. The record of work and the natural world was for her own memory and for permanence, carved "tales of home."

Her poetic style is aptly characterized in these lines from *The Garden:*

> Marry excess with an adroit repose,
> With no confusion of a plan so clear
> It speaks its outline to the mind and eyes,
> Instant, intelligible, and sincere,
> As should be, seldom is, the life of man.
> (*G,* p. 112)

Excess and repose: these two elements do not always combine, the one taming the other. As in the figure of Yin and Yang they remain separate, though together they form the whole. Lines of disarming simplicity may follow a flare of extravagance. Like her classical predecessors, she does not idealize work, but shows it offering men a profound harmony with the earth. The natural world may be harsh as well as bountiful, but only there are the springs of life to be found. Roughness and beauty are in the same moment of vision.

Remembering and observing, Vita Sackville-West records the land

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

she knew. Images of life, art, and history are all put into order for recollection, in her poetic art of memory.

Quotations from the two major poems are taken from these editions: *The Land* (London: Heinemann, 1926) and *The Garden* (London: M. Joseph, 1946). Quotations are cited parenthetically in the text as *L*, for *The Land*, and *G*, for *The Garden*.

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf,* III (New York: Harcourt, 1977), p. 297.

[2] Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), *passim.*

[3] Nigel Nicolson letter to me, March 24, 1980.

[4] She referred to this difficulty often in her other writings, including, for example, this letter to her husband: "As to remembering whether a line is by me or someone else, you know very well that I never could. The first shock of this realisation came when I very laboriously hammered out a line, choosing every word most carefully, and arrived at: 'Men are but children of a larger growth.' [Dryden, *Alexander's Feast*] Since then I have been cautious." In Harold Nicolson, *The War Years, 1939–1945* (Volume II of *Diaries and Letters*) (New York: Athenaeum, 1967), pp. 447–48.

[5] Woolf, *Letters,* III, 244.

[6] Hesiod, *Works and Days,* trans. Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 55.

[7] V. Sackville-West, *Country Notes* (London: M. Joseph, 1939), p. 24.

[8] Nicolson letter, March 24, 1980.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Quoted in L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: a Critical Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 2.

[11] V. Sackville-West, "Kent," in *English Country,* ed. H. J. Massingham (London: Wishart, 1934), p. 201.

[12] This dating is proposed in the Lattimore translation, pp. 12–13.

[13] As reported in Michael Stevens, *V. Sackville-West* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), p. 179.

[14] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* III (New York: Harcourt, 1980), p. 158.

[15] Woolf, *Letters,* III, 297.

[16] "I am trying to write my gardening poem. It is much more difficult than *The Land,* because the inherent dignity of agriculture is lacking, and seed-boxes are not so romantic as tilth. But I struggle on. . . ." Harold Nicolson, *The War Years,* p. 265.

[17] *Country Notes,* p. 11.

[18] V. Sackville-West, *Country Notes in Wartime* (London: Hogarth Press, 1940), p. 29.

[19] V. Sackville-West, *Country Notes,* p. 70.

This content downloaded from
93.40.211.222 on Mon, 23 Nov 2020 22:43:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms