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Competing life narratives: *Portraits of Vita Sackville-West*

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In *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* (2008), Adam Nicolson imagines the family estate floating on “a sea of words”. Shelf after shelf and cabinet after cabinet are filled with the paper traces of generations. The writings of his grandparents, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, are stored next to those of his father, Nigel Nicolson.¹ For Adam, these words construct an imaginative “landscape”, one that is “written and rewritten, sheet after sheet, a whispering gallery of family meanings [...], a layered tissue of communication” (23). Sissinghurst and its inhabitants emerge from this accumulated textuality, constructed through multiple narratives. It is fitting, therefore, that the bulk of this “sea” is comprised of life writing: letters, diaries, travel writing, biographies and autobiographies, written and published over several generations. In a recent documentary series on BBC Four, Adam took time to reflect on his career as an author. Guiding the camera around shelves weighed down by books, Adam likened his writing to any other “family business”: “it’s like a family of butchers, you know. Butchers chop up pigs, we write books” (*Sissinghurst*, episode 4).

This article sets out to explore the multilayered textual landscape of Sissinghurst—a product of the Nicolson family business. At the heart of this landscape is Vita and the story of her infamous love affair with Violet Trefusis. She produced her own account of this relationship, a cathartic writing out of her experience, between July 1920 and March 1921. This “confession” was published in 1973 as part of *Portrait of a Marriage*, a biography written by her son, Nigel (N. Nicolson 9). This composite work (part-autobiography, part-biography) has come to inform nearly all subsequent accounts of her life. Significantly, later appropriations of her story serve to highlight the fraught, often contested relationship between

competing life narratives—their mutual responsiveness revealing important relational structures both within and between life-writing texts.

Contemporary life-writing criticism has dispelled the myth of the autonomous individual; new emphases are placed on interaction and the mutuality of self-representation and other-representation. Until recently, however, relationality was claimed almost exclusively for women's life writing. Following Mary G. Mason's groundbreaking account of women's exclusion from the autobiography canon, a gendered dichotomy opposing masculine individualism with collective femininity was the dominant critical paradigm.² This was challenged in the 1990s by critics such as Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin, both of whom sought to expand the category of relational lives, to assert the foundational importance of others to *all* acts of self-representation. For Miller, the dominance of autonomy in canon formation had served to "[read] *out* the self's passionate, vulnerable attachment to the other" (14). As critics, we had become blind to the relational structures pervading life-writing texts. To redress this problem, Eakin posited three broad categories of relationality: texts that locate the subject within a social, communal environment; texts that explore the subject's relation to key individuals or "*proximate other[s]*"; and texts that dramatise "*intrarelational*" connections between a subject's multiple, discontinuous selves (69, 86, 94—italics in original).

Portrait of a Marriage appears to fit neatly into the second category: an exploration of the subject in relation to "*proximate other[s]*". The book combines Vita's confession with chapters of biography that recount and re-tell the same events. Nigel also extends the chronology to encompass Vita's later life. When read in isolation, Vita's confession also demonstrates a concern with the influence of those around her. In particular, she juxtaposes her relationships with Violet and Harold, her husband, with Nigel's biography repeating this juxtaposition. When viewed as a whole, however, *Portrait's* composite structure suggests a further category of relationality. The events being scrutinised impinge on Nigel's life, but at no point does

he become his own subject—nor does he figure predominantly in his mother’s account. Nigel is not, therefore, a proximate other. Rather, he writes his biography in response to the confession, (re)constructing Vita in relation to her autobiographical self. *Portrait* therefore sustains distinct yet mutually-constitutive narratives. Significantly, it is these narratives—and the subjects they delineate—that are proximate and relational.

Vita’s confession can only be accessed through a reading of *Portrait of a Marriage*; it has never been published alone and the manuscript remains in private hands. Her life narrative is therefore *always already* re-written; her autobiographical self cannot be extricated from Nigel’s biographical subject. Retold and revised on its first public appearance, it must come as little surprise that Vita’s life narrative now sustains a fecund industry of life writing. With every revision, there is a necessary engagement with extant accounts; each re-telling aligns or differentiates itself from what has come before. By comparison, Eakin’s categories of relationality are all *intratextual*; they recognise the negotiations between subjects that occur *within* texts. *Portrait’s* composite structure, alongside subsequent revisions and appropriations, suggests an *intertextual* relationality: the construction of narratives and subjects in response to existing, alternative versions of a life.

For Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, relationality suggests that “the boundaries of an ‘I’ are often shifting and permeable” (86). Intertextuality extends this project, with repetitions and revisions suggesting that life narratives are never fixed, nor are they isolable. Smith and Watson gesture towards this intertextuality; they identify the shaping influence of “historical others” on autobiography—cultural “ideals” that provide “generic models of identity” (86). These models function as intertexts; they impact on the construction of life-writing subjects. Moving beyond these “historical others” to consider the rhetorics and strategies of competing life narratives, this article identifies the relational structures that exist between texts and across different genres and media. The number of auto/biographical works pertaining to

Vita's life is substantial. This is in large part due to continued interest in her relationships with women, particularly Violet Trefusis and Virginia Woolf. Her connection with Bloomsbury has also served to sustain interest. Vita can therefore be seen as a special case: an anomalous, exaggerated example of intertextual relationality. I would argue, however, that the volume and range of these reiterations serves only to highlight a more general, underlying trend. Accounts of Vita from within the Nicolson family are *self-consciously* responsive. As such, they demonstrate and dramatise how intertextual relationality works in practice. Focused on *Portrait of a Marriage* and Adam Nicolson's recent documentary series, *Sissinghurst* (2009), this article reveals how an accumulation of life narratives serves to extend the boundaries of the auto/biographical subject beyond and between texts. Intertextuality, therefore, is shown to enable and sustain the Nicolson family business.

Revising lives

Nigel discovered his mother's confession while sorting through her papers after her death in 1962. The manuscript was locked inside a leather Gladstone bag and stored in a small turret-room in the Tower at Sissinghurst. In little over seventy pages of pencilled script, Vita summarised the events of her childhood and the early years of her marriage, devoting the bulk of her narrative to recounting the events of her love affair with Violet. She claimed to be writing "urged by a necessity of truth telling", and this confessional mode is used to guarantee the authenticity of her account (N. Nicolson 9). She writes having spent "no consideration upon [the] task", denying any conscious crafting of her narrative: "nothing [...] in the whole of this writing is to be exaggerated or 'arranged'" (N. Nicolson 26).

The confession is reproduced "verbatim" as part of *Portrait of a Marriage*, but it is divided into two sections and dispersed by chapters of biography (xiv). Nigel's

foreword to the book claims that greater tolerance for homosexuality in the 1970s had “confirmed” his decision to publish (xiii). However, in an unpublished memoir of 1985, he expresses clear ambivalence. Nigel was reluctant to shine a spotlight on his mother’s sexuality, fearing that readers would “make hay with the Violet part” at the expense of her relationship with Harold. It was this fear that prompted him to choose a mediated form of publication. Nigel’s memoir reveals that he wanted to “reduce the impact of V’s confession”, to shift its emphasis from “V. and V.” onto the story of “V. and H.” *Portrait* therefore transforms the confession into a “joint biography of two people”, (re)setting Vita’s narrative within the heterosexual frame of her marriage (“Unpublished Memoir”).³

Nigel’s unpublished memoir highlights the contested relationship between competing life narratives. His “joint biography” is set in opposition to Vita’s confession: the former’s account of “V. and H.” will be used to overwrite the latter’s narrative of lesbian desire. This suggests the palimpsest as an appropriate model for the revision, repetition and accumulation of life narratives. A palimpsest is a “writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another”. Conceptually, it is any “multilayered record” (“Palimpsest”). This description recalls the structure of *Portrait of a Marriage* and its careful arrangement of chapters and narratives. Vita’s confession, for example, is divided into two separate chapters (Parts 1 and 3), where each is followed by a chapter of biography that re-tells events, revising her account (Parts 2 and 4). *Portrait* concludes with a final chapter of biography (Part 5) that extends the chronology to consider the remaining years of Vita’s marriage to Harold. In seeking to “reduce the impact” of Vita’s confession, Nigel’s biographical chapters contain and enclose her revelation of lesbian desire. He can then overwrite the narrative of “V. and V.” with the story of “V. and H.”: a marital relationship predicated on heterosexual norms and practices.

The effect of this carefully mediated publication has been noted by several critics, though none explore it in detail. Georgia Johnston, for example, argues that Nigel's "packaging [of] the memoir" serves to "more fully [bury] the lesbian passion" (61, 60). Similarly, Suzanne Raitt suggests that *Portrait of a Marriage*, when compared to the confession read in isolation, is "differently accented". She claims that Nigel "guides the reader's attention away from Sackville-West's affair with Trefusis, and on to her marriage" (80). Adam Nicolson accepts this reading of *Portrait*, claiming that his father "packed the pain and grief" of Vita's affair into "the cushioning tissue paper" of her relationship with Harold (263). To enact this palimpsestic repackaging, Nigel must first establish the authority of his biographical account. He achieves this through his ability, as editor, to arrange, explain and revise the confession. In his foreword to *Portrait*, he explains the book's structure thus:

The story is told in five parts, two by her, three by myself. Parts 1 and 3 are her autobiography verbatim, altered only by its division into two separated sections (for reasons of balance and intelligibility), and by the substitution of real names for pseudonyms, which are given only when they first occur. Parts 2 and 4 are my commentaries upon it, to which I add essential new facts and quotations from letters and diaries. Part 5 is the justification of the whole book and its title, for it summarizes the remaining years of her marriage, and shows, particularly in the context of my mother's brief love-affairs with Geoffrey Scott and Virginia Woolf, how my parents' love for each other survived all further threats to it, and made out of a non-marriage a marriage which succeeded beyond their dreams. If it does not show that, the book is a betrayal. (xiv-xv)

It is Nigel, as editor, who acts as arbiter for the standards of "balance and intelligibility". His ability to penetrate Vita's account—to divide her narrative and insert

material in parentheses—suggests his authority over the text. Nigel's treatment of pseudonyms, for example, is indicative of his control. Vita employs these pseudonyms to disguise the identity of prominent figures in her confession. In *Portrait*, however, where each first occurs, Nigel supplies the real name in square brackets (making the substitution automatically on each subsequent occasion). It is Nigel, therefore, who reveals that "Robin" is Harold, and "Chloe" is Violet (16, 18). In doing so, he demonstrates his special knowledge; Vita's confession becomes a *roman à clef* to which he, as an editor occupying a privileged position within the Nicolson family, holds the key.

Nigel describes his biographical chapters as a "commentary" on Vita's confession in which he will add "essential new facts". These claims undermine the 'subjective' truth of autobiography. Nigel goes on to highlight several errors in Vita's account and he challenges some of her assertions. For example, he questions the veracity of her claim to have repeatedly attempted to run away as a child. He counters with evidence taken from Lady Sackville's diary, for Vita's mother makes "no mention" of these attempts (61). Here Nigel sets the autobiographical against the autobiographical, drawing upon one of the many alternative sources available to him. It is significant, however, that he assumes the authority to discriminate between contradictory accounts, to identify where the truth lies. Nigel also claims that his biography will confirm and amplify Vita's confession (xiv). By implication, he asserts the importance of his account as a necessary aid to understanding. For example, he provides the reader with two timelines—simplified chronologies of the events being described—and a family tree, the latter being offered as a "key" to the intricate, often-confusing bloodlines of the Sackville-West family (53). That such clarifications are deemed necessary suggests a falling short in the original autobiographical narrative. Here Nigel contrasts Vita's fallibility with his own seemingly 'objective' biographical truth.

Having established the authority of his biographical narrative, Nigel begins to construct the “panegyric of marriage” culminating in the book’s final chapter (xiii). To achieve this he extends the chronology of Vita’s confession, recounting the events of his parents’ lives together after the Violet affair. According to his foreword, this new narrative forms the “justification of the whole book and its title” (xiv). It may seem surprising, therefore, that in a chapter designed to do “justice” to his parents’ marriage, Nigel should choose to examine, in detail, two further affairs (xiv). The affair with Geoffrey Scott, however, is used to re-heterosexualise Vita; he is shown to revive “her physical acceptance of a man’s love”, which had “lain dormant” during the Violet affair (180). Baptismal imagery suggests the erasure of Violet: Scott is “refreshingly different” and his love letters read “like an invigorating shower after a torrid breeze” (181). Nigel reproduces a further extract from Lady Sackville’s diary in which she highlights Scott’s important role: “He knows all about Violet, and says his love will redeem Vita’s reputation” (180-181). It is not the loss of reputation occasioned by an extra-marital affair that Scott will “redeem”, for his relationship with Vita compounds this transgression. Rather, it is the promise of redemption from lesbian desire. *Portrait of a Marriage* enacts this promise. In recounting the affair with Scott, Nigel overwrites Vita’s confession, imposing a narrative of renewed heterosexuality.

Vita’s relationship with Virginia Woolf does not mark a return to desiring, physical lesbianism. Rather there is a marked continuity between Scott and Woolf, for both are antithetical to Violet. Woolf supersedes Scott—he is “replaced by someone to whom he could not hold a candle” (184)—bringing with her a uniquely non-physical brand of sexuality. Selections from correspondence between Vita with Harold are used (without comment on this problematic provenance) to empty the relationship of physical desire. Despite having confessed to sleeping with her twice, Vita insists that her love for Woolf is “a very different thing: a mental thing; a spiritual thing, if you like, an intellectual thing.” She goes so far as to claim that she is “scared

to death of arousing physical feelings” because of Woolf’s delicate mental health (188). Nigel reinforces this rhetoric. He sides with Quentin Bell, Woolf’s nephew and biographer, reducing the significance of the women’s sexual activities and claiming it to be “a travesty of their relationship to call it an affair” (189). Here Nigel begins to overwrite the confession with a narrative of platonic, intellectual love. Vita, for example, is shown to mature as an artist during her relationship with Woolf. In 1924 she published *Seducers in Ecuador* at the Hogarth Press. Nigel considers it “the most imaginative of all her fiction”, viewing the novella as an attempt to “write something ‘worthy’ of Virginia” (186). Woolf, in turn, writes *Orlando* (1928), an experimental biography famously described by Nigel as “the longest and most charming love letter in history” (186). Here Violet is overwritten by the aesthetic reciprocity of Vita’s relationship with Woolf.

Following Scott and Woolf, aberrant, extra-marital desire is allowed to disappear from the text. No more of Vita’s lovers are explicitly identified beyond the mention of a few telling names. It is important to recognise, however, that Harold’s sexuality is also subject to careful handling. That his relationships with men feature in *Portrait of a Marriage* at all is to the full credit of Nigel, for Vita makes no mention of it in her confession. *Portrait*, however, dedicates just one page to the exploration of Harold’s sexuality, subjecting his affairs to the same restricting rhetoric used to depict Vita’s relationship with Woolf. Nigel insists that “the physical element” was “very secondary”. Harold, he tells us, “was never a passionate lover” and his sexual encounters with men were “about as pleasurable as a quick visit to a picture-gallery between trains” (131). Having disposed of his father’s sexuality in this way, Nigel then re-casts him as a figure of heroic masculinity: Harold must “rescue” his wife from the love affair with Violet (137), while simultaneously performing the roles of doting father (as evidenced by letters to his sons) and “angelic son-in-law” (169) to Vita’s concerned mother. Nigel’s overwriting of lesbian desire can thus be seen as part of a broader project, one obfuscating the homosexuality of *both* his parents. At the

conclusion of Part 5, Vita's marriage to Harold is the only relationship under consideration. Husband and wife die together, though six years apart, on the final page of the book.

Documenting lives: (re)covering Vita

In February and March 2009 BBC Four broadcast *Sissinghurst*, a documentary series following the attempts of Adam Nicolson and his wife, Sarah Raven, to establish a working farm on the Sissinghurst estate. The series promised to grant behind the scenes access to life within the castle walls. The daily dramas of the National Trust were recorded on camera and viewers were privy to Adam's research for a new book—a history of the estate and his family's life there. The result was *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, a textual counterpart to the documentary series published a year before broadcast. Though ostensibly a biography of place over personality, the book revisits the Nicolson "family mythology", a collection of mythic narratives and identities characterised by Adam, however uncomfortably, as the "brand" of Sissinghurst: "Heritage horticulture with a lesbian-aristocratic gloss" (A. Nicolson 258, 63). As this description suggests, the principal subject of the family myth-making is Vita. In writing the book and filming the documentary, Adam returns to the story of her love affair with Violet, challenging what he calls "the Nicolson version" of events (*Sissinghurst*, episode 4). Significantly, the refuted life narrative here belongs to a Nicolson, not a Sackville-West. *Sissinghurst*, therefore, is an attempt to demythologise; the book and documentary promise to strip away the interpretation and revisions imposed on Vita's confession by *Portrait of a Marriage*, revealing and recovering her original, seemingly-authentic account.

Documentary television is a form peculiarly suited to the making, and troubling, of such claims to authenticity; it is bound up with problems of representation. John Grierson, for example, who coined the term in 1926, describes

documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” and this phrase encapsulates the double-bind pervading any attempt to define its aesthetic (Grierson 11). The form is caught between contradictory impulses. Documentaries claim authority on the basis of their seemingly-truthful representation of events, and yet audience interest is won and sustained through the careful shaping of reality, the imposition of “structuring and narrativising ploys” (Kilborn and Izod 12). In the case of *Sissinghurst*, this conflict is intensified by its hybrid form. Strongly reminiscent of docusoap programming popular throughout the 1990s, *Sissinghurst* combined observational and expository documentary modes with various techniques borrowed from serial drama (Kilborn 95).

Observational documentaries elide the distance between subject and audience; the filmmaker does not appear to intervene in the events being depicted, thus promising “unmediated and unfettered access to the world” (Nichols 43). *Sissinghurst’s* minimal use of voice-over (restricted to transitions between scenes) and its fly-on-the-wall camera technique stake a claim to this authenticity. The audience presumes “unmediated” access to the National Trust enterprise, the farm project, and Adam’s revision of the “family mythology”. Frequent pieces to camera, however, belie the observational mode. *Sissinghurst’s* participants—its on-screen characters—address the audience directly. Adam, in particular, fulfils the role of narrator, expounding topics and presenting arguments to the audience (Kilborn and Izod 58). His research into the family history, and the on-going farm project, both provide underlying narratives, and the development of these plots reveals the series’ expository mode (Nichols 34-38). While the series appears “unfettered”, it nonetheless constructs a persuasive, instructive account of events.

Sissinghurst’s mixed mode of documentary was packaged and sold as light entertainment, demonstrating all the basic ingredients of docusoap—such as fixed locations and “character-driven entertainment” (for example, clashes between Sarah Raven and Head Chef Steve Barnett provide much-needed comic relief).

Significantly, this popular format suggests artifice; it represents a performed reality (Kilborn 100, 103). Richard Kilborn draws a useful distinction between traditional documentaries, in which participants, with little prompting, have their thoughts and actions “recorded *by* the camera”, and docusoap programming in which participants perform “*for* the camera” (106). *Sissinghurst* falls into this latter category, but it makes no attempt to disguise its performativity. Character interviews, monologues and expository plots all serve to highlight the construction (or performance) of a coherent, narrative-driven reality, one that develops over the course of eight half-hourly episodes. The farm project, for example, moves from boardroom discussions through to the first home-grown vegetables appearing on customers’ plates, while Adam’s research into the family history traces his grandparents’ lives together up until Vita’s death in 1962. Significantly, this performed reality constructs a particular interpretation of events. The docusoap format, therefore, reinforces the series’ expository mode. Adam, for example, is cast as the protagonist of the farm project, battling against the reactionary policies and politics of the National Trust. Significantly, his return to the “family mythology” is also constructed within a performed reality, subject to a particular interpretation.

The series’ observational mode is used to suggest the authenticity of Adam’s revised family history. As viewers we are able to step over the National Trust’s red-velvet ropes, granting access to private, family spaces. For example, we see Adam stacking the dishwasher and playing badminton with his children. Viewers are also granted access to a series of important family relics. Adam and several other characters present these objects to the camera—photographs, books, letters, furniture, etc—forming an exhibition of “memorabilia”, the physical “fragments” of family life (A. Nicolson 17). Foremost among these relics is the Gladstone bag that concealed Vita’s confession. Standing in her writing room, holding the Gladstone bag, Adam delivers a heartfelt piece to camera, insisting on the object’s prime importance:

This is the great, sort-of relic of here, really. This is a Gladstone bag which belonged to Vita, [*pointing to embossed initials*] V.N. And, when she died my father came up here and started looking around and found it, and shook it, and heard that there was something in there. But he didn't know what it was, and he didn't have a key, so he tore it open with a, with a razor, and in here he found—now long gone—a confession, by Vita, of her long love affair with Violet Trefusis, which was, became the foundation for the then, the book he wrote about her called *Portrait of a Marriage*. And I remember him describing it to me; that he sat down at the desk here and opened it, and started reading and did not stand up until he'd finished. I mean, it was something—I don't know—fifty-thousand words later; gripped by this story of the terrible crisis in her life. And so, I think in a way, you know, this Gladstone bag should be the thing people come to Sissinghurst to see, you know, is her, it is her beating heart, this. (*Sissinghurst*, episode 4)

This revelatory moment is the product of *Sissinghurst's* hybrid televisual form. It is enabled by the observational mode: visitors to Sissinghurst are not allowed to enter Vita's writing room, nor are they able to touch the Gladstone bag. But here, through Adam, the viewer does both. This section occurs in episode four of the eight-part series, a position suggesting the centrality of Vita's confession and her relationship with Violet. Structurally, the series' episodic format (borrowed from serial drama) requires this mid-point moment of crisis: *Sissinghurst*, as *docussoap*, exploits the romance and excitement of Nigel's discovery to construct its own revised account of family history. Once raised, this plot is subsumed within the series' expository mode. Highlighting the importance of Vita's confession—the “beating heart” of Sissinghurst—Adam's piece to camera leads the way for this and subsequent

episodes to investigate and revise the heterosexual framework of *Portrait of a Marriage*.

The Gladstone bag is made to function synecdochically as the corporeal remains of Vita. Adam employs a striking rhetoric of embodiment to assert the importance of this relic and the affair it represents; the life narrative contained within (quite literally) is rendered strangely immanent. Throughout the series Harold is subject to the same treatment, with comparable relics shining a spotlight on his own sexuality, thus countering its near-erasure in *Portrait*. In episode six, Adam leafs through a family photograph album, one that, according to the voice-over, “casts an intriguing light on [Vita and Harold’s] double lives”. Significantly, Adam’s description of the album, and the photographs within, cuts against this implied division between a public, respectable domesticity and a private, hidden sexuality:

This is an album given to Harold by his sons Benedict and Nigel in 1927, and I’ve never really looked at this before, and there’s a lot of Harold’s life in here. This is him at the Paris Peace Conference when he was a, part of the British delegation, err, and, you know, looking like a kind of entirely respectable, almost-Victorian, young-Victorian public servant, which is definitely part of who he was. And then this is when they moved to Long Barn and he’s looking a little more *[laughs]* rugged nine years later, with his boyfriend Raymond Mortimer. And then this lovely family life, actually, going on here with Vita, the garden, the tennis court, the boys and their tutor, Mr Couve de Murville, who later *[laughs]* became prime minister of France. And then this, suddenly, just slapped right into the middle of all this sweet domesticity, we have ‘July 21st 1927’, someone called Eugene, with very few clothes on, and very displayed, lovely, elegant, gay body. And that is quite mysterious, I think, in this totally domestic set up, suddenly to find, you know, these rent boys. (*Sissinghurst*, episode 6)

This album is another relic of Harold and Vita's lives together, one that suggests the integration of multiple, seemingly-contradictory facets of identity. Its record of public, professional life combines with images of familial domesticity. Interwoven throughout are the faces of known lovers and the homoerotic spectacle of naked male flesh. This amalgam of images resists the separation and containment of sexualities. As relic, therefore, it revises the "family mythology". Adam's light-hearted perusal of these photographs serves to undermine the heterosexual framework of *Portrait of a Marriage*. In doing so, he diversifies his father's account, insisting on the centrality of homosexual desire.

As the series develops this plot, Adam poses a direct challenge to the silence shrouding homosexuality within the walls of Sissinghurst itself. Confronting Sam Butler, the property's Visitors' Services Manager, over the failure of the onsite exhibition to address this aspect of Harold and Vita's lives, Adam exclaims: "the gay thing is just so important, you know, in the foundation of Sissinghurst, well, modern Sissinghurst anyway, and yet we never say a single thing about it" (*Sissinghurst*, episode 5). Though there are photographs of Vita and Virginia Woolf on display, no mention is made of their relationship. Rather, images of the women are set alongside photographs reinforcing their domestic, marital status. Adam bemoans the result: "There is Virginia with her husband; here is Virginia with Vita's two sons; picture over there of happy married life. There is no sense of homosexuality being a factor here." This erasure is used to establish the exhibition as something inauthentic; it ignores an essential part of Vita and Harold's life, and thus ignores an essential part of "what Sissinghurst means" (*Sissinghurst*, episode 5). By contrast, Adam's nominally-private exhibition of family relics is established as an authentic record of his grandparents' lives. The diversity of images in Harold's photograph album, for example, functions as the antithesis of the onsite exhibition's unvaried representation of heterosexual, marital bliss.

Sissinghurst's plot of restored homosexuality, bolstered by the series' seemingly-privileged access to an authentic family record, is brought to bear on the "beating heart" of Vita's life: the confession of her love affair with Violet. In episode 4, Adam re-examines his father's handling of the affair in *Portrait of a Marriage*. Having displayed the Gladstone bag, insisting on the importance of the narrative it symbolises, Adam goes to meet Annabel Eliot, Violet's great-niece. They discuss the relationship between the two women and revise *Portrait's* judgment that Violet was the guilty party, an "evil woman" to blame for the destructive seduction of Vita. Annabel inverts this model, positioning herself against the Nicolson "point of view". She claims that Vita "broke" Violet's life, insisting that Violet "suffered far, far more than Vita did". Adam then returns to Sissinghurst to consider this new, alternative perspective:

I've always thought of Violet Trefusis as the kind of wicked, slimy serpent in the story. And, of course, you know, Annabel sees it from the other side, as this very vulnerable and fragile victim, in a way, of Vita's potent seduction. And that does totally turn the story upside down, you know, makes Vita this striding and using person, not a kind-of sweet wife led astray. That's very different from the Nicolson version. (*Sissinghurst*, episode 4)

Neither *Sissinghurst* the book, nor *Sissinghurst* the documentary series, fully challenges "the Nicolson version" of Vita's life. Both reiterate its dominant concern with successful, long-lasting marriage. Adam, for example, insists that Vita and Harold were as "deeply bound to each other as anyone ever has been" (*Sissinghurst*, episode 6). His revision of the "family mythology", however, diversifies *Portrait's* account. Just as the onsite exhibition is thrown into relief by the diverse images contained in Harold's photograph album, so "the Nicolson version" of Vita's affair is rendered inauthentic. Adam offers a new reading, questioning his father's casting of

discreet roles. Who now is the victim? Who now is the potent seductress? Adam revises the image of Vita as a “sweet wife led astray”; he challenges the essential heterosexuality of this identity, insisting on the importance of her lesbian desire.

Conclusion: life-writing industries

Adam’s return to the “family mythology” demonstrates a key feature of the palimpsest as a model for competing, relational life narratives. It is motivated by the desire to “resurrect or uncover the underlying text”, to restore an original, authentic account (Dillon 65). Palimpsests are rarely read for their uppermost layers; great time and effort is spent on the detective work of delving beneath. This goes some way to explain the continued fascination with Vita’s life. In challenging “the Nicolson version” of events, Adam acknowledges the palimpsestic structure of *Portrait of a Marriage*; he attempts to recover Vita’s confession and to restore its narrative of homosexuality. However, the phrase “family mythology” is problematic. It suggests the telling and re-telling of multiple life narratives, an ever-increasing accumulation of mythic stories, not the distillation or paring down of redundant, inaccurate accounts. In developing an expository plot, *Sissinghurst* contributes to this growing body of stories. Its appropriation of an observational style, granting privileged access to private spaces and family relics, remains a performed reality. As the series revises extant accounts, it constitutes a new interpretation.

Here the palimpsest model for life writing is unsettled, for it presumes the existence of an authentic, referential life narrative—an original layer upon which the palimpsest builds. Both *Portrait of a Marriage* and *Sissinghurst* reveal authenticity to be a rhetorical fiction, a means to establish authority. Adam’s visual display of family relics, for example, finds its counterpart in the broad range of textual sources used by Nigel to confirm and amplify Vita’s account (N. Nicolson xiv). But the confession—the original layer—remains an absence; only readable via *Portrait*, it cannot be extricated

from “the cushioning tissue paper” of its published form (A. Nicolson 263). However, if Vita’s confession *could* be accessed, could it really be said to constitute an authentic, referential life narrative? For Georgia Johnston, the confession itself is palimpsestic. Exploring its inscription of sexual duality, Johnston claims that Vita “belie[s] [her] self”; she constructs and valorises a feminine, heterosexual side to her personality while simultaneously denigrating and partially erasing her lesbian desire (58). For Johnston, therefore, Vita’s “palimpsestic subject position” renders the confession “counterfeit”; its narrative “falsifies even as it tells the truth” (70, 63).

Contemporary life-writing criticism has subjected the notion of referentiality to close scrutiny. A new focus on the *graphia* of auto/biography—fictions, rhetorics and strategies of (self-)representation—has complicated life writing’s claim to truth (Smith and Watson 213-234). For Richard Holmes, this has sounded a death-knell for the concept of a definitive life. He claims the idea of “a final, truthful, ‘definitive’ account must always be something of a chimera” (19). Holmes’ metaphor is singularly telling. As chimera, the definitive life is reduced to myth; it becomes an enduring *impossibility*. The chimera is also suggestive of multiplicity, being comprised of contradictory parts. In the case of Vita, life narratives accumulate in palimpsestic layers despite the impossibility of an original, referential account. Her life has become infinitely re-tellable. For example, the authority of Vita’s confessional mode is challenged by Nigel’s conflicting claim to “balance and intelligibility” (xiv). Adam, in turn, has challenged “the Nicolson version” of events, basing the authority of his account on the evidence of family relics. Here life writing is shown to be responsive and open to endless revision.

This is good news for the Nicolson family business; it sustains the “sea of words” upon which Sissinghurst is built, for there is always the potential to write and sell a new version of a life (A. Nicolson 23). There is a paradox, however. Each version of Vita’s life adopts a pose of authenticity while simultaneously requiring this pose to be an acknowledged fiction. It is this lack, or absence, of referentiality that

enables the constant revision and reiteration of Vita's life—the constant repackaging of her story for the market. For Adam and Nigel, this has been a self-conscious practice. Reflecting on his father's decision to publish *Portrait of a Marriage*, Adam locates the text within an “unrelenting publicity campaign”: Nigel's preparation and publication of “volume after volume about his parents' intriguing lives” (118). In the 1960s Nigel edited his father's diaries and letters; in the 1970s he published *Portrait*; in the 1980s he commissioned authorised biographies of both his parents; and in the 1990s he permitted the BBC to adapt his mother's story, transforming it into a lavish costume drama. The result was a dramatic increase in visitor numbers at Sissinghurst, peaking in 1991 at 197,000 (A. Nicolson 118). Following the publication of *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* in the autumn of 2008, an extra 15,000 visitors passed through the gates before the end of the season. Following the broadcast of the BBC Four series, visitor numbers increased again, this time by almost seventy per cent (A. Nicolson 303). Adam's *Sissinghurst* therefore extends the publicity campaign into the 2000s. Here the notion of a family business begins to lose its metaphoric quality, gaining a new and pressing reality. As BBC viewers, we are encouraged to buy the book we see Adam researching and writing; as readers of the new paperback edition of *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, we are confronted with the legend: “Now A Major BBC Series”.

The telling and re-telling of Vita's life narrative has become a commercial as well as a cultural industry, sustained by the intertextual relationality of life writing. There is a refreshing honesty to this, however, for no attempt is made to disguise the commercial aspect of the Nicolson family business. Adam acknowledges this underlying motive and he is scrupulous in recording the impact that his revisions to—and reiterations of—Vita's life narrative have had upon the coffers of the Sissinghurst estate. He insists, however, that the publicity campaign is “canny [...] not cynical.” It has a memorialising function. For Nigel, it was also “a form of honouring his parents' memory” (A. Nicolson 256). The same can be said for the farm project and Adam's

research into the “family mythology”. Father and son both attempt to (re)construct and preserve authentic narratives, whether of place or personality, and these competing claims to authenticity reveal the multiplicity and responsiveness of the memorialising project. The result is a vital and dynamic industry of life writing.

Notes

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¹ To avoid confusion between the many Nicolsons that form the subject of this article, I will refer to individuals—after the first occurrence—predominantly by their first name.

² Mary G. Mason’s “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” (1980) was one of the first feminist critiques of women’s autobiography and canon formation. It was published in James Olney’s *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*—the sole contribution on women’s life writing. For the afterlife of Mason’s gendered dichotomy, see Miller 1-4 and Eakin 47-48.

³ I am grateful to Adam Nicolson for his permission to quote from this unpublished memoir.

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