

We Are Wise, Wise Women; We Are Giggling Girls

"I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia."

- Vita Sackville-West

by Kate Rockwood

Everything was going swimmingly until August, when I ran out of money. Staying in Chicago, unemployed for the summer, turned out to be more difficult than planned. And so concerts became less frequent, dining out a thing of the past. My main memory of the last month of summer is, night after night, sharing a pot of cabbage with one of my roommates and debating the boundary between friendship and love (Did I mention we had no tv? We needed something to fill those evening hours). And it seems such a junior-high conversation—do you like him or do you *like like* him? I insisted on complicating the discussion by exchanging phone calls with my long-distance girlfriend while writing love letters to my Chicago friend, while climbing into bed with my roommate. Where were the lines drawn and who had drawn them? We came to no conclusions—we ended the month long debate sensing there was a distinction yet unable to articulate it.

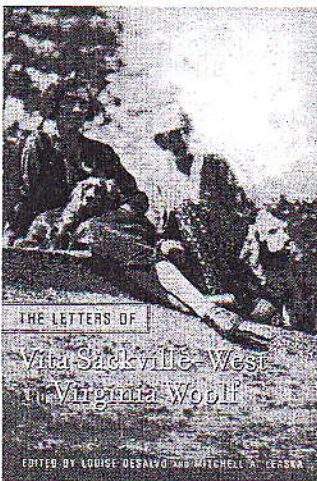
Picking up "The Letters of Vita Sackville-

I scanned the pages quickly and found myself asking the same question—well, did they like each other or did they *like like* each other... were they dykes or what?

did they *like like* each other or, perhaps a more mature formulation of the question, were they dykes or what?

After reading the collection of almost two decades of letters between Virginia and Vita, I am more certain that there is no need to classify their love than I am certain how to classify it. Both women were articulate, skilled writers—Virginia with more artistry, Vita with more immediate success. Yet each woman saw in the other something she lacked. To Virginia, Vita was the better woman; to Vita, Virginia was the stronger writer. Their relationship existed as a series of contradictory, overlapping roles: Virginia the sickly child in need of care, Vita the loving mother; Virginia the skilled writer, Vita the awestruck admirer; Virginia in need of domination, Vita needing to dominate. Their relationship was neither smooth nor consistent; breathless letters of love and passion were followed by weeks of silence. And throughout their friendship, their love affair, their connection, marched a series of other people (husbands for both women, female lovers for Vita, who had a remarkable skill for breaking up mar-

riages, Virginia's closest confidant Ethel Smyth in the early 1930s, who "did not usurp or even disturb Vita's place in Virginia's heart. Her love



for Vita simply folded its wings and waited in silence.") It seems there was, indeed, plenty of room for confusion in the "intense and sometimes untidy game of love they so beautifully dramatized."

The book is marvelous in its simplicity, remarkable in its thoroughness. This is a collection of letters, not between the two writers but from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf. Virginia's letters are included only when helpful and all letters are free of unnecessary explanation or notation. Vita is left, in large part, to herself and here the weight of her words shimmers and shines. "I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia," wrote Vita, "I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone...I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a great deal...So this letter is just really a squeal of pain. It is incredible how essential to me you have become."

The introduction chronicles Vita's life, from her mother who ran hot and cold to her marriage and string of love affairs. Yet the introduction also serves as an analysis of the letters, bringing forth elements that the reader is then able to trace. "In their art as in their lives, however great the differences which separated them, they were alike, women of formidable resilience and determination. In their writing Virginia, the innovator, tunneled her way into the future and Vita, the traditionalist, sorted out the past. And during these years of alternating confidence and doubt in their private lives, Virginia learned all the adverbs of manner and motive, and Vita mastered all the verbs of love and passion."

To say that their relationship influenced their writing would be an understatement. Much of

The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf

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the intensity found in Vita's "All Passion Spent" seems garnered from her love of Virginia, while Virginia called "Orlando" a fictional biography of Vita. Though Virginia committed suicide in 1941, devastating Vita, she bid a farewell to her love in her posthumously published novel, "Between the Acts," in which there is a line "birds syllabing discordantly life, life, life." This line connects back to a passage in Orlando, Virginia's longest love letter to Vita, "What's life, we ask, leaning on the farmyard gate; Life, Life, Life! Cries the bird, as if he had heard." The depth of Virginia's love emerges when we learn that in her youth Virginia studied Greek and Latin, for in this posthumous novel "Life, Life, Life!" translates into Latin as "Vita, Vita, Vita!" And nothing seems more fitting for Virginia's farewell to Vita, who had infused Virginia with such passion and vitality, such life.

"The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf" raises more questions of intimacy and love than it answers. It chronicles the relationship of two remarkable writers, delighting anyone interested in either Vita or Virginia, anyone in love with love letters, anyone needing to expand their definitions of romance. Yet I pause as I end the collection and return to my question of liking one another or *like like* one another. Can we really say that there is no black and white of friendship and love? That each relationship dances in the gray?

"I love Virginia—as who wouldn't?" wrote Vita in a letter to her husband, "But really, my sweet, one's love for Virginia is a very different thing; a mental thing; a spiritual thing, if you like, an intellectual thing, and she inspires a feeling of tenderness, which is, I suppose, owing to her funny mixture of hardness and softness—the hardness of her mind, and her terror of going mad again. She makes me feel protective. Also she loves me, which flatters and pleases me... I have too much real affection and respect for her... Besides, Virginia is not the sort of person one thinks of in that way. There is something incongruous and almost indecent in the idea. I have gone to bed with her (twice), but that's all. Now you know all about it, and I hope I haven't shocked you." Indeed, Vita, indeed. FP

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Kate Rockwood would rather spend twenty minutes explaining her exact relationship with someone than hand you a word like "girlfriend." She dreams of clementines and girls that create their own romance.