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Supposing the Germans "Defeated Great Britain in the Present War": Freud's Death Drive on Three Levels of Narrative Communication in Vita Sackville-West's *Grand Canyon*

Abstract

Published in 1942, Vita Sackville-West's *Grand Canyon* presents an alternative history of the Second World War. The novel is literally suffused with the theme of death, but to discern it, one has to read it between lines. The aim of the paper is to argue that the threat of death is manifested in *Grand Canyon* on three levels of narrative communication proposed by Manfred Jahn: action, fictional mediation and non-fictional communication. Moreover, the paper proves that the way in which the novel is haunted by death on each of these levels corresponds to Sigmund Freud's theory of death drive, according to which: (1) the individual's life-producing instincts ("Eros") are complemented by his death drive ("Thanatos"); (2) the whole civilisation is led by the death drive of individuals.

Keywords: Vita Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, Modernism

Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) was an English poet, writer and gardener. She was a prolific writer – she wrote a multitude of novels, biographies, poems and garden guides, but one may risk the statement that the author is famous more for her controversial aristocratic life and love affairs with other women-writers than for her works. One of her lovers was Virginia Woolf, who introduced Sackville--West to the Bloomsbury Group. The long relationship was inspirational to both sides: for example, Vita dedicated her experimental novella *Seducers in Ecuador* to Virginia, whereas the latter wrote *Orlando*, a mock-biography of Vita. The relationship between the two writers is widely explored by scholars; *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* by

Karyn Z. Sproles[1] and *Vita & Virginia: The Lives and Love of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* by Sarah Gristwood[2] are the examples.

Orlando is a fantasy novel; so is *Grand Canyon*. Published in 1942, the unknown – or simply forgotten – work presents an alternative history of the Second World War. In her work, described by her as a "cautionary tale",[3] Sackville-West speculates what would happen if the Germans defeated Europe. In this alternative scenario the war has not finished yet, as it was not finished in 1942, when the story was written; the Nazis won in Europe and now they attack the United States.

What is characteristic of the fictional world, in which such a scenario is being set, is the tangible, insistent presence of death. The aim of this paper is to argue that the threat of dying is manifested in the novel on three narrative levels proposed by Manfred Jahn: action, fictional mediation and non-fictional communication.[4] What is also going to be proved is that the way in which *Grand Canyon* is haunted by death on each of these levels corresponds to Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive.

The choice of the psychoanalytical approach for the purpose of the analysis of the novel is not a coincidence. Sackville-West was familiar with Freud's writings – in the microfilm which consists of the author and her husband Harold Nicolson's published and unpublished works from Sissinghurst, they both mention the psychoanalyst several times. For example, Sir Harold writes about him in the letter to his son Benedict. In the library of Sissinghurst Castle, moreover, there is a book by Stefan Zweig *Mental Healers: Franz Anton Mesmer, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud*[5] with a an inscription "H.N. / Sissinghurst", which also implies that the Nicolsons were familiar with Sigmund Freud's theories.

Furthermore, as mentioned by the biographer Victoria Glendinning, Sackville-West possessed such works as six volumes of the sexologist Havelock Ellis, psychologist Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* and the poet Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, which are the tangible evidence of the author's interest in the psychology of sex.[6] However, as Aimee Elizabeth Coley[7] points out, considering Sackville-West's

> concern with the connection between subjectivity and sexuality, her silence about psychoanalysis is striking. Her (close) relationship with Woolf and (antagonistic) relation with

[1] K.Z. Sproles, *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*, Toronto 2006.

[2] S. Gristwood, *Vita & Virginia: The Lives and Love of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*, London 2018.

[3] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, London 2013 [1942]. Digitalised book, pdf version, p. 3, https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=201410G7 (access: 20.02.2020).

[4] M. Jahn, *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*, University of Cologne 2017, p. 4, https://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.pdf (access: 30.12.2019).

[5] S. Zweig, *Mental Healers: Franz Anton Mesmer, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud*, London 1933.

[6] V. Glendinning, *VITA: The Life of V. Sackville-West*, London–New York 1983, p. 405.

[7] A.E. Coley, *Repression/Incitement: Double-Reading Vita Sackville-West's The Edwardians through Freud and Foucault*, "Graduate Theses and Dissertations" 2011, https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3044/ (access: 6.04.2019).

> Bloomsbury would have made her aware of psychoanalysis in a general way, and she would likely have known about Virginia's ambivalence toward psychoanalysis".[8]

Victoria Glendinning mentions Sigmund Freud only once in Vita's biography: in the context of the poet's luncheon with Virginia Woolf, which "ended up with Virginia being dropped at Selfridges to buy steak because Freud was coming for dinner".[9]

The idea of the death drive was first proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1920, when he claimed that the drive towards self-destruction, referred to as "Thanatos", complements the tendency of the human being towards survival and life-production, called by the psychoanalysist "Eros".[10] Or, in other words, apart from the need to procreate and live, the individual is led by the desires to die and destroy, which are his death instincts.[11] Later Freud applied that theoretical pattern to the Western civilisation as a whole: in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* he claims that the "inclination to aggression" is "the greatest impediment to civilisation".[12] He also asserts that civilisation "obtains the mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals".[13]

Freud's theory of death drive thus, by and large, says that: (1) the individual's life-producing instincts are complemented by the death drive; (2) the whole civilisation is driven both by Eros and by the death drive of individuals. Nowadays psychoanalysts see this theory as rather nonsensical or simply fanciful, says Jon Mills;[14] however, according to him, the idea of the death drive "potentially provides a viable explanation to the conundrums that beset the problems of human civilization, subjective suffering, collective aggressivity, and self-destructiveness".[15]

"The force of the negative", says Mills, "is so prevalent in psychoanalytic practice that it becomes perplexing why the death drive would remain a questionable tenet among psychoanalysts today".[16] As the scholar points out, from phenomenological perspective there is no option to negate the strength and importance of the negative.[17] Death is, indeed, an inherent part of human reality; to realise that it is sufficient to watch the world evening news, which, as Mills asserts, "is about nothing but death, destruction, chaos, conflict, tragedy, and human agony".[18] Furthermore, says the scholar, "even medical science is perplexed with the internally derived forces that deleteriously ebb the healthy organism from life,

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[8] Ibid., p. 3.
[9] V. Glendinning, *VITA: The Life of V. Sackville-West*, London–New York 1983, p. 298.
[10] S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Middlesex 1987, p. 316.
[11] Ibid.
[12] S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Middlesex 1987, p. 310.
[13] Ibid.
[14] J. Mills, *Reflections on the Death Drive*, "Psychoanalytic Psychology" 2006, 23 (2), p. 373.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 374.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

adaptation, and survival based upon attacks by its own immune system or endogenous constitution (e.g. cancer, AIDS, ALS)".[19]

The concept of the death drive is explored by the author of *Grand Canyon* in a many-sided way. To discuss the problem comprehensively, Sackville-West needed to go far beyond what is merely said or done by her characters. Apart from the most basic level of the narrative, the problem "infects" also the levels which are in a sense "above" the level of characters and their actions. One of those degrees which are "above" is the message the author communicates to the reader, which, in the case of *Grand Canyon*, is equally important as the story itself, because, as the author says in the introduction, she wrote the novel as a warning.[20] Also the third layer, narration, is of significance in the discussion of the death drive in the novel. The narrative model that stresses the importance of all of these three degrees of narrative, not in the least favouring or discriminating any of them, is the one proposed by Manfred Jahn, who distinguishes action, fictional mediation and non-fictional communication.[21] Apart from the fact that the model treats the story, narration and the message above it on equal terms, it is important to note that each level has its own set of addressers and addressees – and due to those two factors, this model may prove to be useful for the analysis in the paper. On the most basic level, the level of action, the addresser and addressee are characters; on the second level – fictional mediation – they are the narrator and addressee, and at the degree of non-fictional communication, the "sender" is the author, and the "receiver" is the reader.[22]

The level of action usually introduces the reader to characters and setting of the narrative.[23] *Grand Canyon* tells the story of the visitors of the Grand Canyon hotel. Some of them are native Americans who came there simply to enjoy themselves; some of them are members of troops; and there is also a group of people who came there from European countries such as Great Britain, Poland or France to take shelter from the war – and for those people the room in the hotel is the only place on earth they own. On the level of action *Grand Canyon* is haunted by the theme of death in two ways: by the protagonists' actions and by means of a symbolic construction of the setting.

1. Actions and setting: death on the level of action

The protagonist through whom the death soaks into the narrative in a distinct way is the manager of the hotel, Mr. Royer. He is a traitor collaborating with the Germans, waiting for the call with a secret message from Europe; once the message arrives, he has to set the hotel on fire. But until then he is to be a conscientious manager. Though slightly abrasive, he plays his role perfectly: "he seemed to be

[19] Ibid.
[20] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, op.cit., p. 3.
[21] M. Jahn, op. cit., p. 4.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

enjoying himself, a happy cork bobbing on the waves of this sudden excessive business. He was here, he was there, he popped up everywhere he was wanted. […] Be of service; always be of service".[24]

Royer organises unforgettable events to entertain visitors. He, for instance, commits Indians to perform their rituals or – in the evening – lights the environs splendidly. Each spectacle costs his staff a lot of money, but all visitors admit that these events are impressive. The manager knows it very well, too. When the moment to burn the hotel comes, he is thus torn between his devotion to the Nazis and his love for "his" invention: it is difficult for him to set fire to

> his dear hotel, his pet, his creation, his pride, his triumph. […] The Manager was a man torn in half. One half of him wanted to advance the Nazi cause; […] the other half wanted to keep his creation intact since he had made it and felt about it as a mother feels about her child.[25]

It is said about Mr. Royer that "on the whole he was pleased with life".[26] One of the British visitors at the hotel, Mr. Dale, says about Mrs. Royer: "'if Satan is anything of an architect, […] that is how he has built his Hell'".[27] Then Mr. Dale acknowledges: "'[…] no one but God or Satan could ever have invented anything like that'".[28] According to the visitor, the manager is creative and powerful to the extent of God. Royer's performances imply his will to live and produce – a manifestation of the Freudian "Eros".

On the other hand, Mr. Royer is aware that if he carries out the Nazis' order to destroy the hotel, he will be killed by the American troops residing in the hotel. He finally puts the place on fire – and he is killed. This behaviour implies the individual's death drive. Freud asserts that the whole civilisation is driven by death instincts of individuals. In the case of Mr. Royer, his lust for aggression and self-destruction, demonstrated by setting "his" hotel on fire, leads to the destruction of the "whole civilisation", because the hotel in the novel stands for the multicultural society sheltering there.

Mr. Royer's case proves the idea that Freud's theory, according to which the individual's life-producing desires are complemented by the death drive and the whole civilisation is driven by death instincts of individuals, is applied to the novel on the level of action. Another example of the application of Freudian theory on that level is the symbolic meaning of the setting in the narrative.

The first part of the story takes place at the Grand Canyon hotel. Then the hotel is burned and the Nazis begin to bomb America. Two even-tempered individuals: Mr. Dale and Mrs. Temple – decide to take command of the situation, becoming the leaders of the whole group of the hotel guests. Both Mr. Dale and Mrs. Temple had experienced the atrocities of the war in their country before they emigrated (e.g. Helen Temple's son was killed as a soldier in Europe). They do not want the story to repeat, so they decide to take refuge from bomb attacks in the depths of

[24] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, op. cit., pp. 17–18.
[25] Ibid., p. 19.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., p. 24.
[28] Ibid.

the canyon. In this case the individual's need to create and live, defined by Freud as "Eros", is manifested by those two characters' desire to survive.

Macmillan Dictionary defines the term "canyon" as a "deep valley with very steep sides made of rock".[29] A large pit with steep sides resembles a grave. By their will to live and survive, the two individuals – Mr. Dale and Mrs. Temple – literally pull themselves to the grave, proving Freudian theory of the complementation of the will to create with the death drive of individuals.

Also the second part of Freud's statement, saying that individual's death instincts contribute to the death drive of the whole civilisation, may be relevant here in the case of the setting of the story: when the bombing begins, Mr. Dale and Mrs. Temple begin to command the group of hotel guests. They both are so calm and reliable that no one in the multicultural society of the hotel resists following their instructions. All the hotel guests are thus taken down to the canyon, which in this case symbolises a huge grave for the whole civilisation, consisting of people of many nations.

2. The characters' names: death on the level of fictional mediation

The actions of Mr. Royer and the metaphor of the canyon are the examples of how the alternative scenario of the Second World War by Sackville-West is haunted by death on the level of action in the novel. The level above action, says Jahn, is the level of fictional mediation.[30] In this case the meaning goes beyond the story and its characters, but it still remains a message "inside" fiction, sent by the narrator to the audience (or addressee(s)) of his speech.

In *Grand Canyon* such a case is, for instance, the meaning of characters' names. The meaning of names is communicated by the narrator on the level "above" the action – protagonists know their names, but nevertheless they do not pay attention to what their names mean; they seem either not to care about it or not to be aware of the fact that their names convey any particular message.

Mr. Dale and Mrs. Temple, who – as it was proved – literally worry themselves and the rest of the civilisation's representatives into an early grave by means of their death drive, are given telling surnames. A "dale", says *Collins English Dictionary*, is a kind of valley, "usually in an area of low hills".[31] It is not difficult to guess that this sort of ground is appropriate for graveyards – they are rarely built in hilly, mountainous regions; to build a grave one needs flat surface.

Mrs. Temple also has a metaphorical name, which evokes thinking about death as well – one goes to a temple to pray, because he or she believes in life after

[29] *Macmillan Dictionary*, https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/canyon#canyon__1 (access: 6.04.2019).

[30] M. Jahn, op. cit., p. 4.

[31] *Collins English Dictionary*, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/dale (access: 6.04.2019).

death. According to Mrs. Temple, through the process of dying one just passes from one state to another:

> death, thought Mrs. Temple as she hesitated between staying downstairs in the saloon and going upstairs to her own bedroom, death as an event is not really very interesting. It is interesting only as marking the moment of transition between one form of life and another.[32]

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that in order to pass to this "another state", one has to die.

Interestingly enough, also the manager of the hotel – Mr. Royer – has a name which conveys a hidden message on the level above the story. "Royer" or "Roy" means "red": *Collins English Dictionary* says that "Roy" is a masculine name, which comes from the word "red".[33] Generally people with red hair are stereotyped as false, dishonest and deceitful. Mr. Royer is such a person – he is a wolf in sheep's clothes, for under the cover of an exemplary manager he hides his real identity: that of a traitor.

Such an ambiguous, deceitful nature is associated with cats – creatures to which Mr. Royer bears a strong resemblance not only by his personality, but also by appearance:

> So he smiled. As he had a squashed-up face, triangular, rather Mongolian, rather like a cat, he could smile effectively. […] It was not a pleasant smile, for those who could notice; it suggested that he would knife you in the back for a buck or even for the sheer pleasure of doing it; but fortunately for his flock of guests few people did notice.[34]

Furthermore, what is equally important, the red color in this character's name indicates Mr. Royer's burning ambition to serve the enemies, even at the expense of his own happiness and lust for creation, realised by means of the manager's passion for organising impressive events. The hotel burns in fire, and flames are red; this manifests the end of the manager's will to power, which is burnt by his death drive.

3. Historical facts: death on the level of non-fictional communication

Giving her characters meaningful names, the author enables her narrator to communicate the sense of death to the addressee of the narration. By this literary device death seeps into the novel at the level "above the action", namely that of fictional mediation. The last narrative level proposed by Jahn is non-fictional communication,[35] which is simply the message sent by the author to the reader – the one above the two fictional levels already discussed. This case also shows that individual's death instincts cause the death drive of the whole civilisation.

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[32] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, op. cit., p. 37.

[33] *Collins English Dictionary*, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/roy (access: 6.04.2019).

[34] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, op. cit., p. 18.

[35] M. Jahn, op. cit., p. 4.

Sackville-West wrote her novel in the middle of the Second World War, in 1942. Adolf Hitler was still alive and the war was still in progress. From this perspective, the alternative scenario proposed by the writer as a "cautionary tale" could be realised: the Germans could win the war in Europe and they could attack the United States. As readers, we know nowadays that it did not happen: the Germans were defeated and Hitler committed suicide.

Hitler is an example of the individual who – certainly on the level of non-fictional discourse – had a drive for power and creation. Frederic Spotts, the author of *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, says in the introduction to his book that his aim is mainly

> […] to explore the idea that Hitler was two persons – a man of hatred, violence and destruction yet also a man of quite remarkable aesthetic instincts who revered the arts above all else and wanted, after his wars and racial genocide had cleansed Europe, to create a culture-state in which the arts would reign supreme.[36]

It is difficult to disagree with that. Hitler had two faces: the first, well known, was marked by the desire to kill and destroy, and the second – rather forgotten when it comes to analysing the dictator's life as a whole – has its roots in the will to create and build.

From the beginning Hitler wanted to be an artist. As Spotts points out,

> at the age of twelve […] he attended his first play, Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, and shortly afterwards his first opera, *Lohengrin*. The opera occasioned a transcendent aesthetic experience that left him Wagner's prisoner for life. By now he was determined to follow a career in the arts[37]

and he wanted to be a painter – or even, as Spotts says, "not just a painter but a famous one".[38] His artistic desire to create formidable and impressive things stayed with him forever; he admired the ancient Romans, with "their 'grandeur', their 'world empire', their 'imperial might'"[39] and he aimed at expressing his power through architecture, realising that "of all the arts, architecture had throughout history been a primary mode of expressing a sense of national greatness".[40]

This is his "Eros", which was complemented by his death drive, manifested in killing people, destroying Europe and, finally, committing suicide. According to Spotts, there is a huge paradox in that; "the man responsible for more death and destruction than anyone else in modern times", says the author of *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, "wished to forge a state whose cultural achievements would rival those of the greatest civilizations of the past".[41]

Hitler's individual desires and instincts: his "Eros", manifested by his will to create and rule, and his "Thanatos", realised in the dictator's lust for destruction and killing – were certainly not limited to this single person. In fact, those

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[36] F. Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, Woodstock–New York 2009, p. vii.
[37] Ibid., p. 4.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p. 21.
[40] Ibid., p. 26.
[41] Ibid.

instincts of the single individual drove the whole civilisation to death: it is impossible to disagree that the Second World War was the most bloody and ferocious in the history of mankind. Hitler may serve thus as an illustration of Freud's theory that individual's instincts bring about the death drive of the whole mankind.

4. Dead and buried. Conclusions

To sum up, death that haunts the characters, addressees of narration and readers of the story stands for the author as a basis for an alternative scenario of the Second World War. Sackville-West shapes her cautionary tale by means of literary devices such as metaphors and symbols (e.g. the character's behaviour and the meaning of the setting on the level of action and the characters' names on the level of fictional mediation) and refers to historical facts (on the level of non-fictional communication), both of which (fictional devices and facts) concern death and destructive instincts.

This omnipresence of death in *Grand Canyon* proves that Freud's theory also works as regards Sackville-West's prose. Death is everywhere in the novel and it informs readers about the condition of people's minds during the Second World War. The threat of death was an inherent part of the reality of the war. And, as art is the means of expressing one's concerns and fears, Sackville-West's novel reflects concerns and anxieties of her and her contemporaries. The omnipresent death in *Grand Canyon* may be interpreted as an expression of people's mental states during the war. Moreover, what is important in terms of psychoanalysis, expressing one's fears helps one subjugate them and may have therapeutic functions.

The process of healing a person from their trauma through the exposure to the stressor is called exposure therapy. As Michelle Craske points out, this kind of therapy concerns the

> repeated, systematic exposure to cues that are feared, avoided, or endured with dread. Exposure includes in-vivo exposure to actual objects, events or situations, imaginal [meaning re-visiting of a traumatic memory in one's mind] exposure to traumatic memories, catastrophic images or obsessional thoughts; and interoceptive exposure to bodily sensations.[42]

This method of trauma treatment does not work for every patient, Craske asserts;[43] nevertheless, apparently, exposure therapy is highly effective: as asserted by Frank Neuner, the German psychotherapist and professor of psychology and psychotherapy, the "evidence from randomized controlled trials shows that the so-called trauma-focused approaches are the most successful methods for the treatment of PTSD".[44] Exposure therapy therefore presumes that in order to get rid of a traumatic memory, one has to get accustomed to it, which happens by means

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[42] M. Craske, *Optimizing Exposure Therapy for Anxiety Disorders: An Inhibitory Learning and Inhibitory Regulation Approach*, "Verhaltenstherapie" 2015, 15 (2), p. 134.

[43] Ibid.

[44] F. Neuner, *Safety First? Trauma Exposure in PTSD* [in:] *Exposure Therapy*, eds. P. Neudeck, H. Wittchen, New York 2012, p. 299.

of the "confrontation of feared stimuli either through imagination or in person".[45] To put it clear, by talking or writing about something, one removes it from one's head. In a way, so does the author in *Grand Canyon*, discussing the worst scenario of the Second World War for Britons that she can imagine.

What is more, alternative histories themselves have a therapeutic function. They may present a fictional scenario that is either positive or negative; regardless of which pattern they follow, however, they may provide a reader with one thing: consolation. Reading a fictional scenario that is far worse than reality, a person may realise that the position he finds himself in is in fact not as bad as it may be, which gives him a good starting point to face the nightmares he encounters in real life. The positive scenario, though contradictory to the former, leads to the same outcome: reading about a better reality, a person gets into it and starts dreaming, which helps him forget about his problems, at least for a while.

Sackville-West says that she wrote her novel as a "cautionary tale".[46] By means of the insistent presence of death in the novel the author gives a warning to readers, speculating what may happen if the danger of a totalitarian regime is not stopped. This warning does not only apply to the period of the war, when totalitarianisms reached their peak; it is rather universal, it corresponds to any other times when the risk of controlling people takes place. The author writes in one of her poems: "the shadow teaches, better than the light"[47] – and in *Grand Canyon* the presence of death on all three levels of the narrative is fully justified and effective: the novel may be read as an expression of hope that the omnipresent nightmare lived by the author and her contemporaries is never to be suffered again.

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[46] V. Sackville-West, *Grand Canyon*, op. cit., p. 3.

[47] V. Sackville-West, *The Garden*, London 1946, p. 133.

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