

Literary Couples and 20th-Century Life Writing: Narrative and Intimacy.
Janine Utell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). xi + 215pp.

This lively monograph by Janine Utell—who has previously written about James Joyce’s treatments of marriage and desire—contributes to Woolf studies, modernist studies, and life-writing studies, a scholarly field that treats such texts as diaries, letters, and memoirs in limning how writing and thinking help people to cultivate their individual and shared lives. Utell’s introduction and five body

chapters meditate on the nature of intimacy and the generic properties of life writing, and they underscore Woolf's importance to scholars, both as a source of theoretical ideas and as a biographical figure. This review focuses on Utell's introduction and opening chapter, the latter of which highlights people intimate with Woolf, including her parents and her lover Vita Sackville-West. But Utell's other informative chapters cover life writings by four additional literary couples and further develop her ideas about "intermentality" (a couple's shared mental world) and the afterlives of a couple's storyworld (one partner's retrospections after the other's death, or later commentators' ruminations after both members die).

Utell's introduction outlines her attitudes toward genre, the ontology of selfhood and intimacy, and methodologies of use to biographers. Each attitude owes much to Woolf, Bloomsbury, and modernism. Concerning genre, Utell lists subcategories into which her critical objects fit: the broadest category of *life writing* encompasses *relational life writings*, which in turn contain *intimate life writings*, which contain *couple biographies*. She focuses on this fourth, most specified subgenre, which she sees as in conversation with narrative theory and affect studies. She acknowledges that coupledness is not a *sine qua non* for a good life or a good intimate life—in keeping with the admonitions of philosophers like Elizabeth Brake, who warns that amatonormativity marginalizes other ways of being. But spurred by this subgenre, Utell's critical curiosity roams. She counsels, pace Laura Marcus, against seeking strict generic coherence in life-writing studies, both because doing so might exclude relevant writings and because it would "presume" a "unitary" writing subject. In other words, Utell is wary of essentialistic thinking—as am I (and Woolf). But I doubt Utell's second claim—that strictly defining literary genres implies anything about a critic's attitude toward selfhood. Moreover, scholarly arguments depend on some essentialistic thinking—i.e., defining terms. To her credit, Utell deftly handles the inchoate concept of intimacy, by embedding her definition in a book-long discussion of the phenomenon that includes many escape hatches from essentialistic simplifications. I find her wording cumbersome but her idea provocative. She defines intimacy as the world "co-creation" of people in a relationship "who recognize each other's alterity" (10).

Utell's book provides multiple reasons for seeing intimacy in dynamic, non-essentialistic ways. She stresses that lovers' "interworld" of "we" is not prediscursive, but is woven and re woven across their time spent together. Love and the act of writing about it change people "ontologically." Couples narrate their own "becoming" as subjects, and it is no accident that they often did so during the modernist era, which witnessed new forms of biography and autobiography, as well as new ideas about gender and sexuality. Frequently, Utell observes, these narratives distinguish an originary moment of passionate, lustful attraction from the subsequent harder work of intimacy—as writers build plot points in their stories about their love lives.

These ontological convictions—about the non-unitary writing subject, the discursive "we," and the importance of alterity—have ramifications for couple biographers and autobiographers. Utell's first chapter explains how Woolf's 1927 essay

“The New Biography”—a review of *Some People*, a book of character sketches by Vita’s husband Harold Nicolson—remains a touchstone for scholarship on its titular topic. So too does Woolf’s 1939 essay “The Art of Biography,” which discusses *Elizabeth and Essex*, Lytton Strachey’s 1928 biography of Elizabeth I. To a lesser degree, so too does Nicolson’s 1927 literary-historical study *The Development of English Biography*, published in Hogarth’s *Lectures on Literature* series, wherein Nicolson says that Victorianism died in 1921, when the “essentially commemorative” impulse behind Victorian biography gave way to modernist impulses. In other words, Utell documents how modernism’s new paradigm for thinking about biography was an incestuous Bloomsburian conception: group members and affiliates published and reviewed one another’s biographical works, as well as theorizing biography as a form (Woolf) and historicizing it (Nicolson). Woolf’s “The New Biography” displays her rhetorical skills, and recalls Nicolson’s comment about “commemorative” values, when she distinguishes the “granite” qualities of Victorian biographies—such as those in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, of which her father was the first editor—from the “rainbow” of human variety that she prizes in modern life writing.

But Utell ingeniously declines to bludgeon Leslie Stephen with a granite/rainbow binary. She will not “reify” a Victorian/modernist “rupture,” she says, but instead attend to the two eras’ shared interest in intimate life. Stephen’s *Mausoleum Book*, a memoir of widowhood, written between 1895 (when Julia Stephen died) and 1904 (when Leslie died), “appropriates” the deceased’s life, Utell says, so as to make the spouses’ shared world available to others, especially their children. Utell is shrewd enough not to take Stephen’s protestations at face value, when he apologizes for dipping into “narrative” and claims not to be writing “autobiography.” (You do both things, and to good effect, she avers.) Utell credits Stephen with capturing the “rainbow” of Julia’s selfhood, drawing on Julia’s letters to her first husband, Herbert Duckworth, and portraits of her across her adulthood. Utell admires Stephen’s appreciation of Julia’s alterity: Julia remains “distant, lovely but unreachable” by her grieving widower, including in Julia’s grief over her loss of Duckworth.

Utell’s first chapter moves from discussion of the *Mausoleum Book to Portrait of a Marriage* (1973) and Woolf’s *Flush* (1933). *Portrait* is officially authored by Vita’s son Nigel Nicolson, but two of its five sections (the first and third) provide Vita’s account of her married life, while Nigel added the other three sections after his mother’s death. Nigel says that he published the book, first, because Vita would have wanted him to, and second because it might help people with queer sexualities. The book focuses on Vita’s 1918-21 affair with Violet Trefusis, expressing her guilt over it, her fear of losing Harold, and her tender feelings for him. Vita claims not to exaggerate or arrange anything (reminiscent of Leslie Stephen’s anxieties about fictionalizing real things). Utell smartly calls Nicolson the book’s “narrator-arranger”: he lends himself credibility by casting himself as a sympathetic outsider to his parents’ intimacy, he centralizes their marriage and marginalizes Vita’s lesbian romance, he builds narrative structure to contain otherwise “unruly” erotic and psychological material, and he even uses his parents’ letters to set up “cues” in their “storyworld”

for readers' sake. Utell does for Nigel and Vita's *Portrait* what she does for Stephen's *Mausoleum Book*: she brings it to life as a literary text, more rhetorically and epistemologically complex than its author sometimes allows, and one that evinces "ethical," "empathic" capacities.

From *Portrait*, Utell's first chapter moves to *Flush*. Its eponymous narrator—Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel—was in fact the subject of letters and poems by Barrett Browning, which Woolf read. Although *Flush* narrates Elizabeth Barrett's coupling with Robert Browning from a dog's perspective, with all the aporia that would be expected from a witty modernist technician like Woolf, Utell reads the text as a couple biography—not of a woman and her dog but a woman and her eventual husband. Woolf employs her canine storyteller as an experiment in modernist (im)personality and a means for asking *how does someone know their partner's life prior to their coupling? how do partners understand alterity in the midst of intimacy? and how might an outsider-narrator afford readers a view of the ontological transformation through which love forms a "we?"* As *Flush* feels his own relationship with "Miss Barrett" alter, readers infer that her relationship with Robert Browning ("the hooded man") also alters. Like Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* and Nicolson's *Portrait*, Woolf's canine confection demonstrates the elasticity of biography and other forms of life writing—their amenability to playful experiment.

Having drawn on Woolf and her immediate peers for foundational concepts and important life-writing texts, Utell dedicates her remaining four chapters to other couples: Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas; Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland; Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy; and Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Utell selects texts creatively, including some not written by her primary subjects, such as Tom Hatchman's comic *Gertrude's Follies* (about Stein), the documentary film *Chris and Don: A Love Story* (about Isherwood and Bachardy), and Bachardy's *Last Drawings* of his dying partner. Extending her archive in these ways enables Utell to develop an anti-teleological theme to complement the aforementioned anti-essentialist theme: if intimate couplings are always *becoming* and never resting in a final state of *being*, then it seems fitting that they would find afterlives in paintings, documentaries, and even comic books, serving the needs of artists or scholars who never personally knew the couple in question.

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