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by Janine Utell, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 215 pp., ISBN 9781350003453

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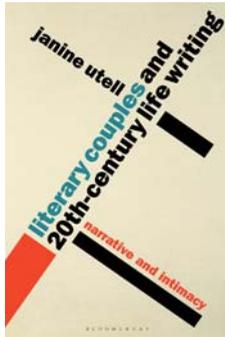
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BOOK REVIEW

Literary Couples and Twentieth-Century Life Writing: Narrative and Intimacy, by Janine Utell, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 215 pp., ISBN 9781350003453



In her 1927 essay ‘The New Biography’, Virginia Woolf famously distinguishes between the ‘granite-like solidity’ of truth and the ‘rainbow-like intangibility’ of personality. For Woolf, the biographer who could successfully ‘weld’ granite and rainbow did not yet exist. How to combine the lifelessness of fact and the luminescence of character? How to craft a narrative that would bring immovable truth and the ‘artistry’ of instinct and imagination into a mutually illuminating partnership?

Though Janine Utell’s latest book is not a biography, Woolf’s ‘queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow’ could not be more apt. Bookending chapters on queer couples and texts with a discussion of Leslie Stephen’s *Mausoleum Book* (begun in 1895) and an incisive look at the colossal body of scholarship on (and speculation about) Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, Utell’s work on ‘the couple biography’ merges granite and rainbow in more ways than one. In chapter two, which examines sexual and textual intimacies between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, a quote from Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) describes ‘the beginning of my life in Paris [... as] like a kaleidoscope slowly turning’ (62). The same might be said of Utell’s book, where the lens turns from one colourful couple to the next, producing patterns and flashes of connection—Woolf conceives of the truth as ‘atoms of light’—in place of straightforward continuity or linearity. Throughout the study, Utell’s interest is in the movement and ‘always-in-processness’ of both couples and couple narratives. The work of intimate life writing, she explains, is ‘to create a space where people in [a] relationship can each be becoming, and be becoming [be coming?] together’ (11).

There is no denying that Stein and Hughes are unlikely bookfellows, and it is perhaps unsurprising that Utell anticipates questions about the unusual focus and structure of her work. At times, the tone is almost apologetic: the book’s scope ‘should be acknowledged as limited and idiosyncratic’ (4), and the author feels that she must attempt to ‘account for [her] choices’ (5). Utell’s specialism as a narrative critic rather than a narrative theorist, we are told, means that she is ‘probably not intervening meaningfully’ (4) in debates around narrative theory’s relation to auto/biography studies. But for all the author’s doubt, the rationale for this tentatively expressed work is clear. Utell’s aim is to draw attention to life narratives produced by both members of a literary couple, even and especially where one partner is less well known than the other. If the book is lacking in cohesion, so too are many of the texts written by and about its coupled subjects. ‘Throughout the tellings that follow’, writes Utell in her introduction, ‘we will find disruptions, vulnerabilities, incoherences, failures’ (11). Taking Sara Ahmed’s lead in examining gaps and ‘haps’—contingencies and chance encounters—alongside and against happiness, Utell embraces the fragments, absences, disagreements, and differences that make up the ‘messiness’ (34) of both couplehood and couples’ life writing.

Opening with a detailed discussion of early twentieth-century life writing and ‘the new biography’, chapter one tackles two texts that might never have been published at all. Stephen’s *Mausoleum Book* was conceived of as a letter to his children after the death of his second wife (Woolf’s mother), while Vita Sackville-West would not have imagined that her memoir—‘this confession, autobiography, whatever I may call it’, as she wrote in 1920—would be brought into print by her son Nigel Nicolson. As Nicolson imposed order on his mother’s narrative of lesbian love, inserting his own explanatory chapters and insisting on the centrality of his parents’ union, Utell describes his role as that of ‘narrator-arranger’ of *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973). The reading of Nicolson’s ‘arrangement’ is generous—‘one could argue that Nicolson’s imperative to render the story coherent is possibly a violation of his mother’s, and his parents’, own unruly desires’ (38) is something of an understatement—and Utell is cautious when considering ways in which the published text does and does not provide access to Sackville-West’s private life. ‘As with any other intimate text,’ Utell admits, ‘much can only be imagined’ (40).

Utell’s imaginative approach takes her from the ‘warp and woof’ of Sackville-West’s marriage to a lively analysis of Virginia Woolf’s biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel. The claim for *Flush* (1933) as a couple biography is convincing, and Utell is right that the dog’s perspective and (lack of) knowledge offers another valuable lens through which to view intimate life writing. From *Flush* and Bloomsbury we travel to Stein and Toklas’s famous salon at the rue de Fleurus, where we are greeted with a retelling of a well-known quarrel between literary modernism’s most celebrated lesbian couple. Utell recounts Karin Cope’s version of the story (in *Passionate Collaborations: Learning to Live with Gertrude Stein*, 2005), where Toklas discovers the manuscript of a novel detailing Stein’s earlier love affair (*Q.E.D.*, written in 1903) and flies into a jealous rage. Stein, according to Cope and Utell, then writes *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in order to placate her partner. But in 2003’s *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises*, Ulla E. Dydo establishes that this narrative is not quite true: detailed archival research reveals that Toklas ‘did not read *Q.E.D.* until after the *Autobiography* was written’ (Dydo, 498). Utell draws on Dydo’s exemplary work on Stein elsewhere in the chapter, so it is not quite clear why she then repeats the claim that *Q.E.D.* ‘sparked the creative atonement of the *Autobiography*’ (79). There are a few further errors in this otherwise informative and entertaining chapter—Shari Benstock’s now seminal *Women of the Left Bank* (1986) does not ‘echo’ (65) Diana Souhami’s later *Gertrude and Alice* (1991)—but these kinds of minor slips are almost inevitable in a book with such a remarkable range. Picking up the thread on Nicolson as ‘narrator-arranger’, Utell asks that we recognise Toklas as the ‘arranger’ of Stein’s narratives. The comparative reading of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Toklas’s *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954) is playful and illuminating, as is the energetic analysis of Tom Hachtman’s serialised comic strip *Gertrude’s Follies* (1978–1982).

Having carefully considered problems of coherence and absence in couple narratives—there is a time, of course, both before lovers meet and after one partner dies—Utell goes on to explore loss and failure in the shared life and works of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. Utell describes the couple’s jointly produced poetry collection *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* (1933) as ‘an expression of their hope, ultimately to be thwarted, that the writing of both together would shape their coupled life mutually and reciprocally’ (85–86). While Warner and Ackland insisted that the collection was not a collaboration, as they each wrote individual poems separately, Utell considers the book as a whole, observing that the selecting and arranging of the poems ‘told the story of their “we”’ (89). The chapter is genuinely moving in its examination of the pain of infidelity and grief, but it is not all doom

and gloom. In a letter to Warner in April 1934, Ackland reflected on the pleasure of being ‘together’ in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*: ‘It is extraordinarily pleasant to me to think of this child of our love’ (94). Though there was perhaps a missed opportunity to explore Ackland and Warner’s textual ‘child’ in relation to Stein and Toklas’s pleasant creation of ‘babies’, the chapter complements and expands on the earlier work on romantic narratives of lesbian modernism.

Chapter four marks a temporal leap forward. The insightful examination of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy’s intimate writing—which takes in drawings and diaries, portraiture and a podcast—intervenes in ongoing debates around queer temporality and queer optimism. As we have seen in previous chapters, couples’ lives and life writing are often characterised by imagination and play. Where Virginia and Leonard Woolf affectionately called one another Mandril and Mongoose, Isherwood and Bachardy were ‘The Animals’, Dobbin and Kitty: ‘What Kitty must particularly remember is how very proud Dobbin is of him,’ writes Isherwood in a 1961 letter (130). As Utell suggests, ‘the imaginative world of The Animals furthers the intimacy of the men in the couple, creating a space for mutual affectivity which also serves as a bulwark against the threat of betrayal’ (131). Of course, the self-containment or ‘worlding’ of a loving partnership poses problems for the biographer, whose knowledge of the couple’s inner workings will always be sketchy. We learn that Isherwood himself occupied this role when he ‘arranged’ a double biography of his parents, *Kathleen and Frank* (1971). Utell is ‘not really interested in the extent to which Isherwood’s work here does or does not have referentiality in the “real world”’. What I am interested in is the narrativity of this text’ (137–138). As is the case elsewhere, Utell’s methodology favours rainbow over granite.

Chapter five turns to the most written about of writerly couples, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Utell identifies metaphors of confinement in both partners’ writing, from mausoleums and hothouses to bell jars and glass cauls (171), showing how the couple’s shared ‘storyworld’ could be at once intimate and suffocating. In many ways, the book’s last chapter recalls its first: the mausoleum takes us back to Leslie Stephen’s narrative containment of a ‘disruptive dead wife’ (30), and the couple’s ‘public performance’ (170) of their private relationship on a BBC radio programme reminds us of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson’s curious broadcast on marriage over 30 years earlier. It may be both odd and ambitious to attempt to navigate (and contribute to) the ‘galaxy of biography and critical archive study’ (155) around Plath and Hughes at the end of a book primarily on queer pairings, but important and illuminating points of connection with previous chapters provide a series of pleasing kaleidoscopic turns. With the galaxy of scholarship bringing to mind chapter one’s early reference to Barthes’ description of the first radiant ‘*rencontre*’ in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977)—‘later on, in memory, the subject will telescope into ... moments of the amorous trajectory’—the expansive and starry final chapter seems a fitting conclusion.

Literary Couples and Twentieth-Century Life Writing is an interesting and imaginative book on collaboration, mutuality, and narrative intimacy. Utell may prefer rainbow to granite, but this work nonetheless lays solid foundations for future scholarship on literary love and life writing.

Notes on contributor

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