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Curriculum Vitae: Transsexual Life Writing and the Biofictional Novel

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stream of verbal monologue.⁹ It is interesting to point out that O'Brien's Virginia resembles Woolf's shell-shocked character, Septimus, who, in turn, was partially born from his author's own experience. People and characters from different ontological worlds mirror each other, and their words create complex echoes in O'Brien's bioplay.

As Virginia Woolf may be one of the most thoroughly documented literary figures of the twentieth century, the major challenge for biofiction writers who appropriate her life is certainly to give full rein to their creativity within the boundaries of documented auto/biographical material, and consequently render them malleable and porous to include and absorb imaginative events. O'Brien's and Atkins's personal responses to this challenge were to adhere very closely to Woolf's auto/biographical and fictional truth, to give birth to two versions of Virginia that come straight from Woolf's own oeuvre, and to endow their characters with a voice that speaks with Woolf's very words. Both Virginias, who come alive on the stage, thus look familiar and sound authentic.

For both Atkins and O'Brien, who have confessed in numerous interviews to being obsessed with and possessed by Woolf, their respective plays that stage the character of Virginia may be viewed as a necessary act to exorcise the authorial ghost that has been haunting them, in the very same way Woolf herself "ceased to be obsessed"¹⁰ with her mother and reconciled herself to her sudden, tragic death, after capturing her and completing her artistic vision in *To the Lighthouse*. Thus, giving life to the character of Virginia amounts, for Atkins and O'Brien, to both a creative and therapeutic exercise, which has allowed them to finally let their foremother rest in peace.

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⁹ Dawn Duncan referred to *Virginia* as a "stream of consciousness play" (103).

¹⁰ "[...] when [*To the Lighthouse*] was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients" ("A Sketch of the Past" 81).

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Curriculum vitae: Transsexual Life Writing and the Biofictional Novel

The complex relation between *bio* and fiction, life and writing, is central to the project I am currently working on, a comparative scholarly edition of *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex* (1933), the life narrative of Lili Elbe, formerly Einar Wegener, the Danish artist who became Lili Elvenes (her legal name) through a series of surgeries in 1930. In chapter six, Andreas Sparre (the fictional name used for Wegener in the narrative) offers to tell his life story to his friends, Niels and Inger, on the night before his first surgery, his last night as Andreas. Niels responds, "I should like to suggest, if I am not hurting your feelings, that you let me take down in shorthand the *curriculum vitae* which you are about to relate" (57). *Curriculum vitae* means, in the original Latin, "the course of one's life." That *curriculum vitae* can stand in for "life story" is especially apropos for academics. Perpetually being asked for our CVs, as if to justify our existence, our lives as academics are literally in our writing. I can trace the history of my life's writing through what I have written on that classic modernist life writing narrative, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. From my first publication when I was a graduate student in the 1980s to my 2013 essay in *Modern Fiction Studies*, I have been writing on *Orlando* my entire academic life. Yet, far from having nothing left to say, I am proposing to add yet another essay on *Orlando* to my academic life story. Prompted by the opportunity this special issue affords, I would like to reprise my latest publication on this perennially popular modernist narrative, in which I read *Orlando* in relation to *Man into Woman*. What might these works, both iconic narratives of the trans movement, tell us about the genre of biofiction?

In that 2013 essay, I argue that Woolf's fictional work about a sex transformation is more true to the experience of transsexualism—or in today's terms, transgender—than the documentary narrative about an actual sex change. "Insofar as it reconceives the very concept and form of life writing," I claim, "*Orlando* radically refigures the narrative of transsexualism presented in Lili Elbe's more conventional tale" (503). Life writing encompasses various genres—autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, personal essays, case histories—that record someone's experiences, memories, and reflections. While *Orlando* does not give us the life of an actual transsexual, it does give us a different way of narrating a life, one that is more life-sustaining, I argue, than the "wrong body" narratives of so many transsexuals' life stories, including Elbe's (518). The emphasis on writing as part and parcel of Orlando's life presents life writing "not as an account of a life lived, but as the deliberate shaping of a narrative of a life that might be lived, and livable" (517). Speculative, not definitive. I still stand by that argument. Working closely with Elbe's narrative over the past few years, however, I have come to read her story more generously, as a modernist work more like *Orlando* than a traditional memoir or biography, as it is often read. Reading *Man into Woman* as like *Orlando* encourages us to read transsexual life writing as a nascent form of biofiction, and by extension, biofiction as a form of life writing.

Technically, neither *Orlando* nor *Man into Woman* is a work of biofiction, a term more fitting for novels such as Norah Vincent's *Adeline* (2014), subtitled "A Novel of Virginia Woolf," and David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* (2000), based on Elbe's life. Unlike *Adeline* or *The Danish Girl*, neither work uses the real names for their historical characters, a key criteria of the genre. And yet ... *Orlando: A Biography* is dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, contains several photographs of Vita as Orlando, and draws on facts of Vita's life and on Vita's writing. *Man into Woman* contains a foreword by the editor that names Einar Wegener as the subject of the story; contains numerous photographs of Einar and Lili, and Einar as Lili, with captions naming them; and draws on facts of Einar's and Lili's lives and on their writings. *Orlando* presents itself as a biography, written from the biographer's point of view, though it is clearly fiction. Subtitled in the Danish edition, *Lili Elbes Bekendelser* ("Lili Elbe's Confessions") and in the American and British editions, *An Authentic Record of a Sex Change*, *Man into Woman* presents itself as a memoir or case history, though it too is fiction, mostly narrated from a third person perspective with thoughts, dialogue, letters, and diary entries attributed to Andreas and Lili. *Orlando* has an authenticating preface written by Virginia Woolf that lends credence to the research that has gone into this "biography," giving her pages, Woolf writes, "whatever degree of accuracy they may attain" (n. p.). Elbe's narrative has an authenticating foreword written by the editor, Niels Hoyer (a pseudonym), who assures us that the narrative, based on "papers she left behind in the form of this book," is being published "in accordance with Lili Elbe's last wishes" (xiii). As archival evidence shows, the editor and publisher took great pains to shape Elbe's narrative in ways that would not offend the public, as did a scandalous article on Elbe that appeared in the Danish press. Woolf, too, wrote her novel of a famous Sapphist in such a way as to avoid the censorship that plagued Radclyffe Hall's Sapphic novel of the same year, or circumvent a public scandal over Vita's sexual life. And both works, published only a few years apart, recall sexologists' case histories of sexual inversion from the early twentieth century. Certainly fiction, there is enough "bio"—biography, memoir, personal writings, case histories—for each to lay claim to kinship with the genre of biofiction.

Just as Woolf's biographer puzzles over how to write about Orlando's unconventional life, Elbe and her editor had no adequate models for writing the life of a person who changes sex, for though others had undergone surgery before Lili, few had published a personal account of a surgical change in sex.¹ The editor, then, had to invent a form. In doing so, he produces a narrative that deliberately departs from the model he would have had at the time: the sexologist's case study.

Although Andreas's *curriculum vitae*, as his friend Niels records it, does contain information common to case histories—family background and education; childhood signs of cross-gender identification, such as physical traits, dress, and preferred activities; first sexual experience; attitude toward the "opposite" sex—Andreas explicitly rejects identification with those lives. After years of cross-dressing as Lili, Andreas begins to suffer more and more from mysterious bleeding, intense pain, and severe depression, and he comes to suspect a connection between his "double life" and his physical sufferings. He tells Niels and Inger:

And then, like so many sick persons who do not know what is really the matter with them, I began to procure all kinds of scientific books dealing with sexual problems.² Within a short time I acquired an expert knowledge in this department, and knew many things of which the layman hardly dreams. But gradually it became clear to me that

¹ Life writings that Elbe and her editor might have used as models had they known them were *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* ["Memoirs of a man's maiden years"] (1907), published under the pseudonym N. O. Body, with an epilogue by Magnus Hirschfeld, and Earl Lind's *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, published in *The Medico-Legal Journal* in 1918.

² In the Danish first edition, literally "books on sexology" (58).

nothing which related to normal men and women could throw any light on my mysterious case. (100)

Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (originally published in German in 1897) and Magnus Hirschfeld's *Die Transvestiten* (1910), works Andreas (and Einar) might have read, did include case histories of subjects who would later be termed "transsexuals," for both inversion and transvestism were seen to be forms of cross-gender identification.³ Presumably such writings would have allowed Andreas some recognition of his condition. And unlike Ellis's work where homosexuality was seen to follow from inversion, Hirschfeld held that transvestism or transsexualism did not have any correlation to sexual orientation: "Almost all of these persons put the thought of homosexuality out of their minds, many clearly stating an instinctive loathing" (130), as does Andreas. So why might Andreas find no case like his own in this literature?

One explanation is provided by Hirschfeld himself. His theory of sexual intermediaries undid the binary opposition of man and woman, positing an endless range of variants between these extremes. Sexual identification becomes an ongoing task in which categorical distinctions are only provisional, an insight *Orlando* offers as well. Indeed, Hirschfeld's epigraph, "There are more emotions and phenomena than words," echoes a line in the final pages of Woolf's manuscript: "words have yet to be coined for the selves have never been numbered" (280). According to Hirschfeld, "the constantly present merging of both [sexes] into one, the unending condition of mixing variables" (18) allowed for some 43 million combinations of sexual criteria,⁴ far outnumbering Orlando's estimate of 2,052 selves in one body (308). Given the seemingly infinite number of possible variations, Andreas may well not have found himself, or rather herself, in any of the case histories he read. The subject of the case study, like that of Woolf's novel, may be an "exceptional case," but it is also *sui generis*.

"*Sui generis*" precisely describes Woolf's and Elbe's narratives insofar as these works defy conventional generic distinctions and cross genres: biography, confession, fiction, fantasy, case history. I have offered "transgenre" as a term to capture how narratives of and by "transsexuals" necessarily reconfigure the conventions of life writing itself (503), making it more like biofiction than biography. "The transgenre as represented by *Orlando*," I suggest, "is not about being true to life [...] but about the consequences for living of telling a different kind of story" (517). Both *Orlando* and *Man into Woman*, in different ways, make life writing available to trans persons, as Paul Peppis says Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* sought "to make *Bildung* [...] available to homosexuals" (104).⁵ But they do more. In reconfiguring the conventions of life writing, they open that genre to the biofictional novel itself.

Novels, though, are typically single-authored, as are most forms of life writing, with the exception of the case history. *Man into Woman* has a composite author, compiled by the editor from various sources. It is not authored by Lili Elvenes, though the German edition puts "Lili Elbe" in the place where the author's name would normally appear on the title page. Nor is it authored by Einar Wegener, though the Danish first edition housed in the Royal Library catalogues the work under his name and puts "E. Wegener" on the spine.⁶ Importantly, the narrative directly confronts this authorial conundrum. Lili writes to her friend, the editor:

³ Einar Wegener consulted with Hirschfeld at his Institute for Sexual Science before the first surgery. Professor Hardenfeld in the narrative is modeled on Hirschfeld.

⁴ 43,046,721 to be exact (227).

⁵ Jan Morris's *Conundrum*, for example, cites both works.

⁶ The original title for my *MFS* essay—"Time's Queer Force: Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism"—sought to elide this difficulty. When the editor wanted the titles of both works in my title, we decided to attribute authorship for *Man into Woman* according to the Danish first edition, a decision I now regret. Not only is it a misattribution but the Danish edition differs significantly from the English-language editions.

Should I write a preface to the book, to explain why, when speaking of Andreas, I always use the third person, as in a novel? But, my dear friend, what other form of narrative could I have chosen? I could not relate the story of Andreas' life in the first person. Nor could I employ the third person when speaking of my own life and experiences, after Andreas had vanished. (283)

Andreas's *curriculum vitae* is part of Lili's life story yet separate from her "own life and experiences." What kind of narrative form could capture that pronominal and temporal complexity? "That is the key question for transsexual memoirs," I note. "How can an autodiegetic 'I' refer to two differently sexed beings?" (509). Lili's solution, to write of Andreas in the third person "as in a novel," identifies this work as an important historical precedent for biofiction. She avails herself of novelistic techniques as the only way to write the life of an historical person who no longer exists and to create a credible narrative for her own life. As Michael Levenson says of Freud's case studies of neurosis, we might say of the sexologists' case studies of "transgender": each is itself "a pathology of narrative, an incapacity to give a coherent account of one's life" (82) in terms of conventional scripts. In their pronominal promiscuity and chronological chaos (Orlando lives 350 years but ages only 20; Lili insists she was born in the surgeon's clinic and cannot be said to share Andreas's age), *Orlando* and *Man into Woman* give us a new temporality and a new character, one that is "an overlay of past and present" (Levenson 83). Thus, they expose not just "the recursive nature of time in the process of gender formation" (510), as I have argued, but the recursive temporality of any life writing.

This insight can be illustrated by Ebershoff's biofictional novel. Ebershoff brings contemporary understandings of transgender to Elbe's story. In *The Danish Girl*, as in Tom Hooper's 2015 film version, Einar frequents a peep show, watching the erotic performance to learn how to move as a woman, "to study the curve and heft of their breasts, to watch the thighs, [...] to see how their bodies attached limb to trunk and produced a female" (105), something that is not narrated in case histories meant to prove sexual identity is congenital, but something that trans individuals often do.⁷ Although Ebershoff gives us a scene that does not align with Elbe's narrative, Lili does acknowledge her performance of femininity—"I had to demonstrate every day that I was a different creature from [Andreas], that I was a woman" (235)—even as she insists her performance was not "merely farcical acting" (235). Ebershoff's imagined experience corroborates that truth.

Similarly, Ebershoff seeks to correct Lili's misconception of herself as a totally separate being from Einar/Andreas, reading her story through nonbinary theories of sexual identity that, as we have seen, were contemporary with her life but not yet widely known or accepted. Ebershoff's novel reveals truths that Lili and her editor could not yet express—namely, that the subject of a sex change doesn't land in another sex as if crossing a bridge, as the title *Man into Woman* suggests.⁸ Reading back from Ebershoff's novel, though, we see what it actually does is to affirm what Lili begins to perceive in the last chapter when, having taken on an art pupil at the urging of her German friend (the editor), she accepts Andreas's artistic legacy that she had previously spurned:

And through this she [Lili] herself had learned and experienced that she too would be able to paint again, that she *had* to paint
..... that she was now strong enough to carry on the inheritance,

⁷ Deirdre McCloskey once told me that she called people "dear" and touched their arm lightly when speaking to them as a way of feminizing herself. Numerous transgender narratives include passages where the subjects adopt specific gestures, voices, or movements in an effort to convey to others their felt sense of identity. But such practices are not unique to transpersons, and as Susan Stryker reminds us, "all human bodies are modified bodies; all are shaped according to cultural practices" (10).

⁸ Actually, Elvenes objected to that title, preferring "How Lili Became a Real Girl," the title used by my co-editor, Sabine Meyer, for her book on Lili Elbe.

the immortal inheritance, *the artistic faculty*, that Andreas had bequeathed her.⁹

A narrative of absolute difference is being reconsidered even before the narrative is complete. This dawning insight, moreover, is connected to "*the artistic faculty*." Before the first operation a nurse recognizes the significance of Andreas's avocation: "Your case," she said, "is something quite new to us, and what makes it particularly interesting to science is that you are an artist and thus in a position to analyse your emotional life" (121). In a recent article, Nicholas Chare offers a compelling reading of Wegener's paintings in terms of a "trans* aesthetic," noting evidence of Wegener's "transsexualism" well before he transitioned in his paintings of bridges *sans* opposite shore (see Fig. 1 below) and a rare interior of a boudoir *sans femme*. More to the point, Chare's art criticism and Ebershoff's biofictional novel are versions of Elbe's life story, giving us access to truths implicit in the language and imagery of the artwork, if not in the historical facts of the life.



Fig. 1: Einar Wegener. "Au Bord du Seine." 1922. 18x 22 in. Oil paint on canvas. Private Collection

What I am suggesting is that we read biofiction not as fiction about a life lived but as part of the writing of that life, itself a recording of memories, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, the author's own as well as another's, that come from reading works by and about an historical figure. I don't believe most Woolf scholars expect fiction about Virginia Woolf to sanction biography. What we expect instead is some fidelity to the truth of Woolf's life as presented in her writings, personal and fictional. Where we go wrong, I believe, is in forgetting that that truth is *in the writing*, ours on Woolf's as well as Woolf's own. It is not that Woolf's life was once lived and now we write about it; in writing about Woolf we shape the life we have come to value. No one's life story is entirely self-authored. However outré it may be, *Orlando* is a biography of Vita—a *curriculum vitae*, as it were. Even Vita recognized herself in its pages, writing to Woolf: "you have invented a new form of Narcissism—I confess,—I am in love with Orlando" (Woolf, *Letters* 3 574). As *Orlando* illustrates, life writing is not about—or not primarily about—the "factually correct" but about the imaginatively and emotionally true, as is Ebershoff's biofictional novel. "The figure of the transsexual allows for a truer depiction of the genre called life writing," I contend, "which by definition is about the multitude of ways of inhabiting time and space, than does the conventional single-sexed subject. The transsexual's life narrative essentially changes the definition of life writing itself" (519). And in doing so, *Orlando* gives rise to a form of life writing that anticipates the emergence of biofiction, or, put differently, prepares us to read biofiction as a form of life writing. Life writing, like transgender, is not an umbrella term for various genres; it is

⁹ This wording is from Marianne Ølholm's translation of the Danish first edition for our digital edition. The American edition reads "she was now strong enough to claim that immortal heritage which Andreas had bequeathed to her" (271). The quotation appears on p. 177 of the Danish edition, *Fra Mand til Kvinde: Lili Elbes Bekendelser* (1931).

itself a transgenre. That is, the genre itself is trans, not just the subject. The biofictional novel is, historically, part of this crisscrossing of genres, the very stuff of a life story.

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Time, Place, and "Mrs. D": Uptake from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Hours*

One of the many delights for readers who enjoy Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours* is noticing the subtle parallels between the novel and its mother text, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. *The Hours* seems to take pleasure in this also, and on several occasions, the book discusses itself in a meta-commentary disguised as the characters commenting on something else. In *The Hours*, Richard Brown reflects on Clarissa Vaughan, whom he affectionately calls Mrs. Dalloway, and the biofiction he tried to write about her: "Of course, there's time. And place. And there's you, Mrs. D. I wanted to tell part of the story of part of you. Oh, I'd love to have done that" (Cunningham 66). This quote doubles as Cunningham's statement of

purpose for his own novel about *Mrs. Dalloway*. While Cunningham uses *Mrs. Dalloway* to write *The Hours*, *The Hours* also re-envision *Mrs. Dalloway*, telling part—and only part—of its story. *The Hours* emphasizes the homoerotic and suicidal themes of *Mrs. Dalloway* above other themes like class and the impact of war on society, impacting how readers view or remember the earlier novel. My hope is that through this discussion of *The Hours* and its uptakes of *Mrs. Dalloway*, I will draw the fields of rhetoric and literature closer together and demonstrate how terminology from rhetorical genre studies can productively be applied to literature. Literary texts are also rhetorical, and they serve persuasive functions in the world too. Biofiction, here exemplified by *The Hours*, is a tripartite uptake of two genres and a real-life story, and "does" things in the world perhaps more than other literary genres, since it uses and reflects back upon not only other works of literature, but the very lives of its real-world subjects.

The guiding principle for my analysis will be Anne Freedman's concept of "uptake." Although scholars in the field of literary studies do discuss the influences of some texts on others, most have not adopted Freedman's term, a cornerstone of modern rhetorical genre theory. "Uptake" refers to the process by which a reader of a text internalizes and reappropriates the text toward the creation of their own text. For example, if a teacher crafts a writing prompt and gives it to her students, the students have a number of possible uptakes available to them, including "paper," "question asked in class," "email to the teacher," or, to the teacher's eternal frustration, "paper doing something the prompt didn't ask for." Even though the original text paves the way for particular responses, students still have the agency to choose the form of their response and its content. The genres in my example fall into the category of "rhetorical" genres, a term which refers to the commonplace genres that people employ in the course of their daily lives. The business memo, the Facebook post, and the grocery list are all examples of rhetorical genres.

Discussions of uptake are common in articles studying rhetorical genres, but only rarely when studying literary ones. One instance is Monica Latham's "Serving Under Two Masters" in which she situates Woolf's genre¹ as an uptake of both biography and the novel.² Undertaking a study of the genre of biofiction, and focusing specifically on Woolfian biofiction, Latham effectually characterizes biofiction as an uptake of Woolf's own work, describing it as "new genre that shows that imagination can successfully serve these two masters [biography and fiction] simultaneously" (355). "Uptake" allows us to view the biofictional text as the agent of change, whereas the term literary "influence" places the earlier text or genre (in this case, biography and the novel) first in the process, and the later text or genre second. The earlier text is the cause, and the later text is the effect. By theorizing Woolfian biofiction as an uptake of Woolf's own genre-blending, Latham's work enables us to analyze how biofiction affects readers' understanding of Woolf as well as how Woolf's work and life influence biofictions about her. Biofiction may or may not impact readers' understanding of Woolf in a historically accurate way, but it does affect how Woolf and her work are viewed in the reader's eye. Postmodern novels like *The Hours*, which often feature a non-linear, non-subjective depiction of time, provide useful illustrations of this bidirectionality.

¹ Latham does not explicitly name Woolf's genre in "Serving Under Two Masters." However, she characterizes it as Woolf's answer to the problem of serving both fact and fiction in biographical writing. She may be referring to the genre of *Orlando*, which the Triangle Classics edition describes as both "fantasy" and "mock biography" (back cover), but which is understood to be based on Vita Sackville-West.

² Latham discusses *The Hours* further in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism*. Her work is very comprehensive regarding how Cunningham uses *Mrs. Dalloway*. My intention is not to offer an alternative to her readings of *The Hours* but to examine how *The Hours* impacts future readings of *Mrs. Dalloway*.