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Transbecoming: Reading Relational Movement in David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines adaptation of Lili Elbe's life story in David Ebershoff's biofiction novel *The Danish Girl* (2000). Elbe was a Danish artist who was one of the first individuals to undergo gender-affirming surgery in 1930. Developing an analysis of relational movement, the article traces the way in which Ebershoff's novel narrates a transition story—a story of a person changing their expression and presentation of gender. This article's analysis of relational movement focuses on how the narrative of this novel moves the reader through engaging moments. The article argues that these engaging moments allow a nuanced way of understanding transition. By highlighting the centrality of the embodied experience, the relational movement helps the reader to imagine and feel the process of transition and the embodied experience of gender more intensively. This movement is an integral part of a story of transition, which ultimately involves sense-making across a historical period during which stories of trans identification became conceivable and mutated to allow for a wider discourse and changing understanding of gender.

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Lili Elbe (1882–1931, birth name Einar Wegener) was a Danish painter known for being one of the first individuals to undergo gender-affirming surgery. The surgery was performed by German gynaecologist Kurt Warnekros in 1930 at the Staatliche Frauenklinik, in Dresden. After the surgery, she took the name Lili Ilse Elvenes. The wider public knows her as Lili Elbe, which was used in the Danish and German newspapers that recorded her story in 1930. There were other similar stories in Denmark before that of Elbe, which remain untold or unknown to the wider public, with the oldest case being from early 1920s (Holm, 2017). Elbe was married to Gerda Wegener (née Gottlieb, 1886–1940), who was also an artist. The couple lived a bohemian lifestyle, travelling throughout Europe and socializing with other artists and affluent patrons. A year later—shortly after Elbe's death—her story was published as her "confessions," a hybrid genre work edited by Niels Hoyer.[1] Hoyer was a pseudonym for Ernst Ludwig Hathorn Jacobson, who had worked with Elbe in preparing the publication. The book is a result of collaboration between several people, including Gerda Wegener, Poul Knudsen, Loulou Lassen (a journalist), and Kurt Warnekros (Elbe's surgeon).[2] The English translation, *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Sex Change* (Hoyer, 1933/2004), offered a model for transsexual discourse that emphasized the miraculous medical science used in the transition process (Meyer, 2010). The story of Lili's transition is also included in Hélène Allatini's memoir, *Mosaïques* (2019).[3] For the contemporary audience, however, the story is

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familiar through David Ebershoff's bestselling novel *The Danish Girl* (Ebershoff, 2000, = DG) and its film adaptation, which was directed by Tom Hooper.

In this article, I will focus on Elbe's transition story in Ebershoff's novel. I will examine how the novel depicts transition, which is the process of changing the expression and presentation of gender. My aim is to explain how the narrative can evoke an awareness of the relationality of gender. In my analysis, I pay attention to how the narrative moves the reader using affective or engaging moments. I argue that the engaging moments in *The Danish Girl* allow nuanced insights into understanding transition and gender, particularly for readers less acquainted with Elbe's life and whose understanding of transition is influenced by certain cultural expectations. My analysis merges queer narrative theory and the notion of relational movement, viewing narrative as a dynamic network that affects and engages readers on multiple levels. The relational movement involves the processual, situational, textual, and material aspects of narrative, extending beyond its formal structure to provoke effects in the readers.

Narrative studies is an expanding field that has developed from so-called classical approaches rooted in Russian formalist literary theory to postclassical approaches that are still attached to classical traditions but expand the field with ideas stemming from feminist theories, philosophical ethics, cognitive studies, critical theory, and media studies (Herman, 2009). Queer narrative theory comprises different approaches with varying emphases. Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol (2015) define feminist and queer narrative studies as an approach concerned with gender, sexuality, narrative, and the ways in which norms work in and through narratives. From this perspective, gender is relevant "in the production and reception of texts, also in the sense that the gendering of writing and reading has its basis in—and impact upon—lived experiences in the material world (Lanser & Warhol, 2015, p. 7). Thinking and theorizing about the power of narrative in shaping the normativity of gender and sexuality have been a part of queer theory from its early days since the 1990s (Lanser & Warhol, 2015). Queer theorists, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman, have regarded narrative as a conservative and normalizing system, mainly because of its tendency to consolidate heteronormativity and propose paradigmatic forms and ways of ordering the story elements (Bradway, 2021; Lanser & Warhol, 2015; Rohy, 2018). Indeed, the power of narrative in maintaining heteronormativity cannot be ignored, but queer narrative critiques have also expanded the understanding of narrative and its queer potential. The development of queer narrative theory and methodology requires not only a rigorous deconstruction of binary traces stemming from classical approaches but also testing out new theoretical models (Lanser & Warhol, 2015). My approach is inspired by Tyler Bradway's (2021) argument regarding how narrative, as a form, can foster queer relationality through any number of styles. Bradway assesses narrative as a dynamically relational form that offers agency for queerness. In addition to this, I will draw from the idea of narrative as a distributive network of bodies (Bennet, 2015), the notion of relational movement (Manning, 2009), and theorization about the engaging quality of narratives (Phelan, 2007) in developing a reading of the transition narrative as a relational movement. In practice, this means an analytical focus on narrative's capacity to engage and provoke effects in the readers, which afford queer pathways and agencies across time. I am interested in how the narrative can orient us to consider past trans lives in more complex ways. Also, my reading takes into account the ways in which interpretations of gender variety and transition are dependent on specific historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Biofiction

Although the English translation of Elbe's life story attracted a wide audience in 1930s, it is Christine Jorgensen's memoir, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (1967), that represents the "ground zero" of transgender history, to use Susan Stryker's (1999) metaphor. Jorgensen was an American trans woman who travelled to Denmark for gender-affirming care, including hormones and surgeries, in the early 1950s. Upon her return to the United States, her story became

a media sensation and introduced mainstream Americans the concepts of "transsexuality" and "sex change" (Meyerowitz, 2002; Skidmore, 2011). Jorgensen's success story of establishing herself as a "normal woman" has become an origin myth, a "singular reference point for North American transsexual emergence—which is often unintentionally universalized as all transsexual history," as Aren Aizura (2018, p. 31) points out. Jorgensen was not the only trans woman whose story appeared in the mainstream media in the 1950s, but she gained the most visibility because she was closest to the norms of white American womanhood (Skidmore, 2011). In the shadow of Jorgensen, Elbe's story also experienced "a brief renaissance in popular culture" (Meyer, 2015, p. 329).

Both Elbe's and Jorgensen's memoirs represent classical transexual narratives that follow a coherent, chrononormative storyline, which has a linear timeframe for the trans subject's progression through medical transition towards gendered personhood. This progression is possible because of social, economic, and geographical mobility (Aizura, 2018). Geographical mobility—transnational travel as part of the transition process—is, in itself, dependent on the social mobility that comes with white privilege. The publication of these accounts helped to make transness culturally intelligible for a mainstream readership, but at the same time, it also contributed to a normative, white version of the transsexual narrative (Aizura, 2018). The pressure to become culturally intelligible has affected the methods used in telling one's transition story long after Jorgensen. Trans autobiographies have often used narratives and tropes, such as being born in the wrong body, or repeating a canonical story of transition that does not challenge the normativity required for medical gender-affirming care (Hartline, 2022; Pellegrini, 2022; Vipond, 2022). This has been aligned with the pressure involved in dealing with highly regulated medical care, which requires intelligible stories. Access to gender-affirming medical care is necessary—and, in many cases, lifesaving—for trans individuals suffering from strong bodily discomfort, misgendering, and a lack of social recognition of their identities. At the same time, it is essential to keep in mind that the need for gender-affirming medical care varies among trans people, including non-binary people, and not all trans people experience body dysphoria. Still, such individuals have an equal right to access gender-affirming care.

Jorgensen and Elbe have become icons of transgender history, and their stories have been retold and revised across various media and hybrid-genre combinations. Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl* belongs to a specific strand of literary narratives based on stories of trans life in the Euro-America context at the turn of the twenty-first century, most of which were written by cis authors. It represents a crossover genre called biofiction, which refers to a biographical novel that fictionalizes a historical person's life (Lackey, 2021). Biofiction emerged as a counterpoint to the historical novel in the nineteenth century and became especially popular in the 1990s (Lackey, 2021). Michael Lackey (2021) emphasizes the centrality of human agency in biofiction and interprets Ebershoff's novel as a portrayal of the protagonist's journey to agency. Lackey conceptualizes biofiction as way of transforming a past life story into a symbol that helps to "understand certain structures of thinking and being that were at work in the past and that continue to function in the present" (p. 137). Similar examples of biofiction based on trans lives published around the turn of the twenty-first century include Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998, based on the life of Billy Tipton, a US jazz trumpetist) and Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999, based on the life of James Barry, a British military surgeon).[4]

Life writing focusing on trans lives is often categorized under the umbrella of queer narratives that aim to complicate identification and dismantle rigid ways of understanding the relationships between embodiment, desire, and identity (Smith & Watson, 2010). Although the basic idea of queer narratives applies to trans life writing, including biofiction, the narratives of trans lives should also be considered *trans narratives*, which are shaped by specific cultural narratives and conventions related to trans lives (Kähkönen, 2014; Vipond, 2022). In addition, it is relevant to ask who is writing these narratives, what kind of audience they are writing for, and to what end they are doing so. For example, in discussing the ethics of transgender biography, Jack Halberstam (2005) critically observes different motives behind the representation of transgender lives by cis authors and argues

that, too often, they "attempt to rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions" (p. 56). Fictional and non-fictional narratives of transgender lives written by cis authors have often been motivated by the need to ease the anxiety arising from "not knowing" (Garber, 1992, p. 16; Halberstam, 2005, p. 48). This motivation shapes the way in which a desire to cross-dress or live as a member of a gender other than that assigned at birth is explained in narratives focusing on the lives of historical figures.

While trans autobiographies are also shaped by distinctive generic elements and narrative conventions, which have supported impressions of trans lives as following similar linear, ahistorical outlines (Aizura, 2018), the increasing number of autobiographical accounts by trans authors has substantially diversified the stories of trans lives and disrupted dominant medical narratives (Horvat et al., 2022). In the twenty-first century, trans autobiographies challenge earlier classical trans narratives and epistemologically create a new understanding of trans identity (Keegan, 2020, p. 73; Rondot, 2016). In addition, it is necessary to keep in mind that the motivations to write about transgender lives always depend on wider historical, cultural, and political contexts. Instead of solely focusing on what motivates authors—which is still relevant when it is understood in relation to its historical conditions—we also require perspectives that consider what the narrative itself can do.

Narrative as Relational Movement

In this article, I develop a sensory reading of (trans)narrative with the help of queer narrative theory and the notion of relational movement. This approach requires a re-definition of narrative. The basic dictionary definition describes narrative as a story, a written or spoken account of a series of events and experiences.[5] There is no unified definition of narrative in the field of narrative studies but, rather, different approaches that define narrative by emphasizing its processual, situational, or textual aspects. For example, a cognitive approach defines narrative as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman, 2009, p. 2). This definition enables a broad understanding of narrative as a resource for making sense of the world and experience. For the purpose of developing an approach to narrative as relational movement, I will take a step further by applying Jane Bennet's (2015) suggestion of a literary narrative as a text body, as *a distributive network of bodies*, such as words on a page or in the reader's imagination, that have material effects. Bennet's thought represents a vital materialist perspective, which conceptualizes agency as a result of an interactive process that depends on the collaboration or interference between many bodies, human and non-human. Accordingly, I understand narrative as a medium that activates a feeling of complex relationships. As such, it is understood as a "process of worldmaking assemblage" comprising affects and variously mediated elements (Breger, 2015, p. 345). Furthermore, I will consider narrative as involving the dynamics of *relational movement*. I draw on Erin Manning (2009, 2015) conceptualization, which emphasizes how subjects and objects are constituted in a relational process. In a similar manner, I approach narrative as a space that affects readers through relational movement, which involves the processual, situational, textual, and material aspects of narrative. That is, the relational quality of narrative is intricately layered, occurring at various levels. In addition, it exceeds the form of narrative. Narrative, thus, has a capacity to move, engage, and provoke effects in ways that are not strictly bound to individual authors and readers.

To create a feeling of relationality, however, a certain degree of engagement between the text and the reader is required. Here, I draw on James Phelan's (2007) view on the engaging quality of narratives. Phelan (2007) conceptualizes engaging narrative moments as a synthesis of both textual and readerly dynamics, which have a recursive relationship. He suggests that our ways of experiencing narrative (fiction) through certain interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic principles are potentially similar. In the context of my study, I argue that these principles are dependent on epistemologies and ontologies of human life in a certain time and place. By this I mean, for example, that the ways in which we interpret a narrative based on a trans life interacts with social and embodied forms of

understanding, experiencing, and making sense of transgender. In times of epistemological shifts and social chance, we need narratives that offer ways of processing and adjusting our knowledge based on the ways we interpret gender. Following Bradway (2021), I argue that the engaging moments in Ebershoff's novel are linked to queer relationality, which forges a temporal extension across a historical period when stories of trans identification emerge and mutate to allow for a wider discourse and changing understanding of gender.

Approaches to Elbe's life story have often been filtered through the classifications of intersex or transsexual, both of which were established in sexological studies. In the 1930s, the term "transsexual" was not yet in use as a medical category. At the time, German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld used the term "intermediate sexual type" for hermaphrodites, androgynes, inverts (homosexuals), and transvestites. In the 1930s, when Elbe's story spread to American magazines, it was explained as "hermaphroditism," which supported an idea of the surgery as a solution to a biological problem. This was also a time of increasing publicity regarding surgical reassignments in Europe (Meyerowitz, 2002; Sutton, 2012).

Interpreting Elbe's story through explicit classifications links the readings to particular ways of reasoning about a desire for transition. According to Julian Carter (2014), initially, "transition" denoted a standardized process of reassignment, which included psychological evaluation, hormone treatments, and surgery, but in the contemporary context, it is widely understood as an ongoing, indeterminate process that includes some shifts in bodily self-representation. The term has also been critiqued, as it is still often understood in normative terms, that is, as a straightforward movement between two genders and sexes, male and female, and has residues of earlier vocabularies and teleological narratives rooted in biomedical and juridical models (see, e.g. Aizura, 2018; Carter, 2014; Vaccaro, 2013). Elbe's transition occurred before the development of a standardized process, but it nevertheless involved medical examinations, a psychological evaluation, and surgeries. Most of the interpretations of her story tend to assume a fixed (biological) starting point or origin to which the desire for transition can be traced. Instead of attempting to vindicate which of the classifications is closer to the "truth" or repudiating the taxonomies or identities involved, which are always historically specific, we could leave the idea of *the starting point*—along with the need to classify gender in either social or biological terms—undetermined and pay closer attention to what kinds of pathways this desire may take. Within this perspective, "trans life" is understood as a distinctive experience that involves a relational desire to transition, instead of a determinant for identity or an accurately defined category of embodied condition.

Transbecoming

In the author's note, David Ebershoff characterizes the novel as being inspired by the story of Einar Wegener and his wife. The novel imagines the intimate space shared by Einar and "Greta," as she is named in the novel, focusing on their relationship and life in Copenhagen, Paris, and Dresden between 1925 and 1931. The typical expectations for the novel are perhaps attached to an idea of a story that has Einar/Lili as the protagonist, as well as to the genre of the bildungsroman, which involves illuminating the reasons behind the personal transformation of the protagonist. Instead, the narrative helps the reader to consider the complexity of the process and delves into the pasts of both Einar and Greta.

Ebershoff's research into historical sources and memoirs lays the foundation for his novel. He discusses how he has studied the Danish newspaper articles, some authored by Elbe herself, as well as Elbe's diaries and correspondence (DG, Author's note). This exhibits a dedication to authenticity often typical of biofiction. While Ebershoff exercises artistic freedom in telling Elbe's life story, the narrative remains firmly grounded in memoirs and historical records. The novel could have explored more radical avenues, challenging conventional trans narratives if compared to recent developments in trans storytelling across various media, particularly those by trans authors. Nevertheless, given that the novel was

published in 2000, it still offers an intriguing approach to Elbe's story by delving into the relationship between Einar and Greta. This adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the complexity of Lili's transition which starts in 1925, at the time, when such a journey is unimaginable.

The chosen perspective highlights that Elbe's transition does not simply occur within the confines of individual embodiment and agency but, rather, through complex relationality. Employing dance as an analytic framework, Julian Carter (2013) suggests that transition should be considered in terms of physical gestures and movements that offer a possibility of movement towards one another. Carter stresses the dimension of embodied relationality that involves movement. This account contributes to an understanding of the complexity of transgender experience and embodiment. In Ebershoff's novel, the transition is underlined as a relational movement that involves Einar and Greta, as well as their relationships with other people and with things and places around them. This can be further analysed with the help of Eva Hayward's notion of transbecoming, which refers to "an emergence of material, psychical, sensual and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that transform the lived body" (Hayward, 2010, p. 226). The notion considers the trans-body as more than its transition, as a creative response between sensation and environment. The transition process involves relationships in which all the material participants—as part of a distributive agency that also involves structures of power—contribute to the process of becoming.

The beginning of a novel is fundamental for engaging the reader in the story. *The Danish Girl* opens with a scene recalling an anecdote first conveyed in a Danish newspaper article in 1931 about how it was through posing for Gerda's painting that Einar comes to a realization about himself (cf. Lassen, 1931). In the novel, it is in the posing event that Lili's emergence becomes perceptible. The first paragraph begins with the sentence "His wife knew first" (DG, p. 3), which may suggest that Greta senses the emergence of Lili before Einar. On the other hand, it points towards the future present from which this past event is understood in hindsight. The first sentence creates an expectation of something that will have happened. This is a powerful way to begin a novel because it generates temporal engagement. As Mark Currie (2013) argues, the temporal structure of the future perfect in narrative, which hints at something that has already happened, has particular relevance. According to Currie, the uncertain blend of futurity and pastness present in the future perfect hints that what will have happened is something unexpected. This movement is one of the primary functions of narrative.

Next, Greta asks Einar for a small favour, to try on women's stockings and shoes, because her model, Anna, has cancelled. Einar declines to do this, but as he looks at the shoes, he imagines how they would feel on his feet. He puts the shoes on and feels a sensation of something beginning to run through his head, making him "think of a fox chasing a fieldmouse" (DG, p. 8). This marks the first appearance of an ambiguous desire, generated by Greta's insisting and Einar's sensory encounter—sight and touch—with the shoes. The narrative will later return to the same sense of desire and attach more specific meanings of gender and sexuality to it.

This is also a point where the narration moves from the external account of the events (telling) and dialogue to a depiction of Einar's consciousness, channelled through free indirect speech (showing). Free indirect speech immerses the reader in Einar's perspective and embodied experience. This shift intensifies the narrative moment involving Einar's inner conflict. Einar's internalized perspective provides the reader with multiple levels of perception and sense through looking, touching, hearing, and even smelling. The emphasis on embodied and visceral experience is evident, for example, when Einar looks at the shoes recalling a similar pair in a department store window, and upon wearing them experiences a sensation that makes "him think of a fox chasing a fieldmouse." The first chapter is rich with detailed descriptions of Einar's feelings and physical sensations. The use of indirect speech and language that depicts Einar's sensory perception not only immerses the reader in his experience but also emphasizes the animating power of materiality.

Subsequently, Greta asks Einar to try on Anna's dress. Hearing the word "dress" fills Einar's stomach "with heat, followed by a clot of shame arising in his chest" (DG, p.10). Again, Einar refuses at first, but he wants to touch the dress. When he has the dress on, he experiences "a strange watery feeling":

> The dress was loose everywhere except in the sleeves, and he felt warm and submerged, as if dipping into a summer sea. The fox was chasing the mouse, and there was a distant voice in his head: the soft cry of a scared little girl. (DG, pp. 11–12)

The silk feels pleasant, and Einar's feelings of embarrassment and shame subside. He enters a dream world in which the dress "could belong to anyone, even to him" (DG, p. 12). At the end of the chapter, Anna, the model for Greta's painting, enters the rooms with a bouquet of white lilies. As Anna sees Einar, she starts laughing. Offended, Einar is about to ask Anna and Greta to leave the studio when Greta suggests, "Why don't we call you Lili?" (DG, p. 13). If Einar has experienced something similar in the past, it has remained inconsequential until this moment of naming. The naming adds to what Einar has experienced and felt. It occurs after Anna has entered the room, which highlights how the interaction between multiple participants contributes to the emergence of Lili. The scene does not deny the significance of the event to Einar's self-understanding but, rather, displays the complicated relatedness of it.

In addition to the relationships between Einar, Greta, and Lili, the scene includes various material contours of the process by displaying the significance of things, particularly clothing. Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2010), who works in the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies, which focuses on the relationship between people and things, argues for a more radical theory of material culture, one that disputes simplistic views and a semiotic approach to human relationships with material possessions. In an effort to challenge the opposition of things and persons, he argues that things make us as much as we make things. Miller demonstrates, for example, how clothing is not superficial but, rather, plays a part in constituting a particular experience of self. Clothes don't so much "change us as reveal us, even to ourselves" (Miller, 2010, p. 39). A study of clothing should convey what it feels like to wear certain clothing, what kind of feelings and emotions it evokes. Archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012) develops a similar—but more extensive and complex—argument about human existence as *thingly*: things are absorbed into our sense of identity, stimulate our cognitive capacities, and unleash our potential. Human existence involves movement both towards and away from things. In the posing scene, Einar initially feels anxiety and wants to turn away from the shoes and the dress because of the social significations and gender-related rules attached to them. The bodily sensations generated by encountering the objects create an unexpected, pleasing experience, which allows a new experience of his relationships to both himself and the outside world.

The emergence of Lili also involves a bouquet of white lilies, which Anna brings with her. As Greta hands the flowers to Einar, he becomes intensely aware of the strong scent of the lilies and the rusty prints the pistils leave on the dress. The appearance of desire (for something more) and the feeling that this must be hidden from others become overwhelming for Einar. The sense of desire and its prohibition are generated through entanglement with the surrounding materiality, which is wider than Einar's embodied self. The experience offers, for Einar, a vague awareness of new possibilities of being, though it does not mean that anything is possible. As Hodder (2012) argues, entanglement between humans and things is a double-bind that is both productive and constraining. The constraining quality of the entanglement is due to its embeddedness in the social, the historical, and the contingent. Indeed, the novel demonstrates entanglement by making explicit how the emergence of Lili involves both productive and constraining features and cannot be separated from its specific circumstances, which involve systems of emotions, beliefs, and values concerning gender, cross-dressing, and sexuality.

The first chapter builds an engaging narrative event, presenting Lili's emergence as a dynamic process shaped by interactions within a network of humans and material things. The narrative

highlights transbecoming as a spatially and sensually situated relational movement. Furthermore, the reader becomes part of this transbecoming through the text-body that mediates the story. This happens as the narrative engages the reader, particularly through immersion into Einar's experience with the help of free indirect discourse. The multisensory details encourage the reader to think about the various material dimensions of what is happening. Although they are an abstraction of senses and feelings, they move the reader and generate a multifaceted feeling-assemblage. As embodied narratology suggests, our engagement with narrative representation is channelled through affective dynamics, resonating deeply within our embodied experiences (Caracciolo & Kukkonen, 2021). After the first chapter, the particularly engaging moments in the narrative involve the metaphor of a kite that changes its shape and colour, and these moments enfold the reader in the temporal movement in the story.

Queer Movement of Desire

The second chapter begins unwinding the pasts of Greta and Einar from the moment of the narrated present, in the spring of 1925, after the first appearance of Lili. Einar confesses to Greta that he has been thinking about Lili, and Greta encourages Lili to reappear. Lili, whose actions are seen as separate from Einar, changes the household dynamics.

In the third chapter, we learn about Einar's childhood as the only son of a farmer and his wife, who died in childbirth. Einar's childhood is overshadowed by his father's strict rules about what a son can and cannot do. This analepsis—the interjection of earlier events—invites contemplation of how a specific social-material context affects Einar and how the past shapes his relationship to his awakening desire. This desire, a central component of transbecoming, is symbolized in the story by the figure of a kite.

The only bright spot in Einar's depressing childhood is Hans, a friend who induces his first erotic feelings. The first scene with the kite follows the depiction of Hans's and Einar's developing friendship. The boys are playing with a white submarine-shaped kite. Similar to the posing scene, the narration highlights the sensory dimension of the experience. The boys lie on their backs in the grass, and Einar can feel the foxholes beneath them. The sense of the foxholes echoes the idea of "a fox chasing a fieldmouse." The culmination of the scene happens in the following passage:

> The boys were laughing, their noses were burning in the sun. Hans was tickling Einar's stomach with a reed. His face was so close to Hans's that he could feel, through the grass, his breath. Einar wanted to lie so close to Hans that their knees would touch, and at that moment Hans seemed open to anything at all. Einar scooted towards his best friend, and the only strip of cloud in the sky peeled itself away, and the sun fell on the boys' faces. (DG, p. 36)

Einar experiences a new kind of closeness to Hans, one created by physical closeness and sensual proximity, in which the spatial setting and bodies are intricately linked to one another. Similar to the beginning of the novel, the experience of embodied relationality and its entanglement with the kite unleashes a new potential. As the two bodies come close to one another—and Hans seems "open to anything at all"—the potential for something new is created. The kite crashes, making Einar painfully aware of the present and his social circumstances.

The kite functions as queer narrative movement, which disrupts the idea that Einar's later desire to be a woman could be explained by causal relationships between sex, gender, and desire. The desire to be Lili cannot be traced back to either the "true" nature of sex or sexual orientation. The story later reaffirms that the emergence of this ambiguous desire is also related to sexual transformation; defies straightforward answers to questions regarding "why" this transformation took place; and imagines, instead, the multilayered circumstances of the process. In so doing, it disrupts the linearity of a classical transition narrative that would focus on gender identity and draws attention to the ways of thinking about gender identification when one does not fit the normative binaries of either gender or sexuality. This is one point at which the novel, as biofiction, offers

a queer trajectory of living gender beyond normative binaries, which has existed in the past and continues into the present.

The kite scene invokes affective engagement between the text and the reader. It engages the reader to both temporal movement and transbecoming. The reappearances of the kite in the narrative's progression highlight the temporal engagement of a circling desire by creating a loop in which the past, present, and future fold together. The kite guides the reader to these moments of the past and future in Einar's story and creates anticipation. Simultaneously, the kite is linked to the movement, along with transbecoming, by helping the reader to question assumptions about sexuality and gender.

In Part Two, Einar and Greta are living in Paris. Einar begins visiting a salon offering striptease performances. First, he watches girls strip behind a peep window. One day, he watches a young boy instead and experiences unexpected desire. Although the interaction, or a felt relation, with the young boy is a shameful experience for Einar, it contributes to the relational movement of transbecoming. It adds to the entanglement that has been developing each time Lili dresses herself, walks in the public space, and takes her first steps in creating a social life. After the incident, Einar sees a little girl with a black kite. With the second appearance of the kite, the links between desire, sexuality, and gender become more apparent to the reader. As the kite crashes down near Einar's foot, he knows something must change. The need to change does not offer any positive sensation of new possibilities, as compared to the scene with the white kite. Rather, it demonstrates the sticky sort of entrapment that the intensifying force of relational desire creates. Consequently, Einar decides to kill himself after a year if he is not able to find a solution to his problem.

Einar starts reading sexology books about gender development and becomes convinced that he has female organs buried in his body. Greta's twin brother, Carlisle, persuades Einar to meet with doctors. One doctor diagnoses Einar as homosexual, another one suspects he has schizophrenia, and a third suggests a lobotomy. Greta meets Professor Bolk, who assures her that he can change Einar into a woman. Finally, Einar travels to Dresden and goes through two forms of surgery in a women's clinic. Upon entering the clinic, the protagonist assumes the identity of Lili. Following the operation, she adopts Elbe as her new surname, inspired by the river flowing near the clinic. The emphasis on the change from one identity to another could be interpreted as reinforcing normative and limiting representations of trans people, suggesting that the protagonist can only become fully "Lili" through medical assistance. In this regard, the novel retains clear residues of Elbe's memoirs and correspondence that emphasize Einar's "death" and a profound transformation in Lili's voice and demeanour. It's worth noting that the memoirs aim to frame Lili's story for the audience in a manner that makes sense of her choices and highlights the necessity of medical assistance.

As Lili recovers, Greta and Lili move back to Copenhagen, where they live together as friends, but Lili begins dreaming of a future with a man. Along with her desire to become a wife, Lili wants to become a mother. Professor Bolk has promised her that this is possible. Greta does not accept this and refuses to take Lili to Dresden. In her place, Carlisle agrees to accompany Lili to Dresden to receive a uterus transplant.[6]

At the end of the novel, Anna and Carlisle take Lili, who is extremely weak after surgery, to see the river Elbe. By the river, Lili experiences the force of the present moment. At this point, the style of narration changes to free indirect discourse and immerses the reader in Lili's experience.

> And for once Lili stopped thinking about the misty, double-sided past and the promise of the future. It didn't matter who she once was, or she'd become. She was Fräulein Lili Elbe. A Danish girl in Dresden. A young woman in the afternoon with a pair of friends. [. . .] She thought each of them—Henrik, Anna, Carlisle, Hans, Greta. Each, in his own way, partially responsible for the birth of Lili Elbe. (DG, p. 309)

As Lili stops thinking about the past—as part of her effort to deny the past—and the promise of the future, she is freed from the desire to be more.

Lili sees four boys playing with a white rag-tail kite. Suddenly, the kite's string snaps, and the kite sails free:

> Lili thought she heard the over-excited shrieks of little boys buried in the breeze, but that would have been impossible, the boys were too far away. But she had heard a muffled shriek somewhere; where had it come from? [. . .] And above them, the kite was trembling in the wind, swooping like an albino bat, like a ghost, up and up, and then down, rising again, crossing the Elbe, coming for her. (DG, 310)

This paragraph ends the novel. The reader familiar with Elbe's story knows that she is about to die. However, even knowing this does not make the end of the novel tragic. The shriek Lili imagines hearing takes us back to the moment when Einar first experiences the force of desire for something more, which remains ambiguous until the third appearance of the kite, which confirms that this desire is fulfilled in the present. By the river Elbe, she can let go of the need to be more and merge with the image of the kite. The colour of the kite is white—as in its first appearance—with the potential to allow something new. A white kite breaking free from its constraints indicates freedom and a future that will move beyond Lili's individual life story. It reminds us of the pursuit of the present by recalling Lili Elbe's life, as well as our ways of not just making sense of gender but also moving towards a future that exceeds the limits of the narrative and gender in the forms in which they exist in the present. The wayward movement of the kite gestures to the animating force of desire, fostering a queer relationality that stretches across time and narrative. Following Bradway's (2021) argument, the force of desire entails affective agency that extends to queer belonging.

Conclusion

Although Ebershoff's novel recalls a classic transition story, as a work of biofiction, it involves productive connections and movement between the "real story" and fiction. *The Danish Girl* makes the reader imagine and feel the process of transition. Better yet, it creates "transgender empathy" between the text and the reader in ways that help us to "undo the constraints of gender forms," to borrow Lucas Crawford's (2015, p. 179) phrasing.

In my analysis, I have explored how the narrative guides the reader to consider the complex relationality of a transition. The emphasis on relationality brings forward the multiple and ambiguous ways in which what we understand as sex, gender, and sexuality are entangled in the material-discursive world. The engaging narrative moments—the posing scene at the beginning of the novel and the movement with the kite—demonstrate how transbecoming is not a clearly defined, individual or linear process but, rather, a complex set of interactions and movements between people, their embodiments, objects, and material spaces, which have different temporalities. In this manner, the engaging moments help the reader to consider transition and the experience of gender and embodiment more intensively, within an affective process that has to do with senses, feelings, and knowledge.

The temporal movements within the narrative, which are intensified by the kite metaphor, orient the reader to the significance of the story for the present and future. The movements create links between what has actually been in the past and what is in the present. The reader, thus, becomes part of the transbecoming across time through the experience of relationality in unexpected ways. This experience has the potential to expand the prevailing understanding and conceptualization of gender and embodiment beyond the dichotomies of subject and object. Moreover, it may afford new pathways and agencies for transbecomings in the present.

Notes

1. The title of the Danish edition was *Fra Mand til Kvinde: Lili Elbes Bekendelser* (1931).
2. For more on the publication history, see Caughie and Meyer (2020).
3. For the English translation of the chapter relating to Elbe's story, see Caughie (2019).
4. For more on Kay's and Duncker's novels, see Kähkönen (2013) and Kähkönen (2014).
5. "narrative, n". Oxford English Dictionary Online (2023).
6. There is no proof that Elbe received a uterus transplant (Meyer, 2015). According to Meyerowitz (2002), doctors transplanted human ovaries in Elbe. The first successful ovarian transplantation was reported in 2000

(Marin et al., 2020). The first uterus transplantation for human recipients became possible in 2013. New research offers a promise of reproductive potential not only for genetic females but also males and trans individuals (see, e.g. Lefkowitz et al., 2013).

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