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“DANCE A CLEAN DREAM”: AGENCY IN LANGUAGE
IN GERTRUDE STEIN’S *TENDER BUTTONS*

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ABSTRACT

In the words of Gertrude Stein: "Composition is the difference." *Tender Buttons*, her poetry collection published in 1914, is one of the most compositionally daring and misunderstood works within the modernist canon. Stein's composition brings into existence a way of seeing words: she forms her own use of language, both interpreting the rules of grammar and showing clear linguistic choices. In *Tender Buttons*, the word becomes the microcosm for larger philosophical issues embedded within language: identity, the body, being and knowing, and power. My thesis will closely observe how Stein's poems lend themselves to productive dialogs and/or cross fertilization with the linguistic theories of 20th century language philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Valentin Voloshinov. In placing Stein in conversation with these philosophers, I hope to draw Stein in closer proximity to popular language theory and introduce new lenses to help perceive her work. More importantly, I hope to show how uniquely Stein challenges and pushes the boundaries of language, demonstrating to her readers the practice of choice and intent in the language of the everyday.

An Introduction to Gertrude Stein

BACKGROUND

A primary search on Gertrude Stein will yield, at first, unsurprising bewilderment: “the structure of obscurity,” “the making of a modernist,” “the post-modernist,” “really reading Gertrude Stein,” “familiar strangers,” “development of abstractionism,” “spreading the difference: one way to read Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*.” It seems that, along with my secondary sources, which yield titles such as “Gertrude Stein in pieces,” “How I read Gertrude Stein,” “Gertrude Stein and the essence of what happens” and “Gertrude Stein, modernism, and the problem of genius,” there has been recurring interest and even urgency among Stein scholars to truly understand Stein. With the text’s linguistic play and manifesto like obduracy, *Tender Buttons* requires and demands a certain kind of critical attention. Embedded within the text lie impulses to disrupt language as we know it— to explore the meaning of meaning and to explore language through language. It is not only the text itself that demands that scholars to look closely, but the very method and framework of understanding itself becomes a necessary question. These sources suggest that the method of reading Stein is anything but straightforward. Instead, each uniquely builds upon different aspects of the words: sound, semantics, syntax, repetition, the poetic. Others, however, will explicitly reject meaning altogether within her works.

Still, the continual production of scholarly work on Gertrude Stein reveals, at the very least, that her strange use of words gives life to new ones. For the enthusiastic logophile, Stein’s work provides immeasurable opportunities to confront what words really mean, how they are used, and how they undermine our stable notion of reality. Often considered part of the modernist canon of writers, Gertrude Stein and her work have been reviewed by fellow

modernist writers— William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke, W.H. Auden, and Edmund Wilson— who questioned language in similar ways. Marianne Moore, for example, engaged with Stein’s techniques of language by commenting on how Stein employs “a chiseled typography and enticing simplicity of construction that are not those of ordinary book-making.” Moore’s view of a “chiseled typography” pleads to Stein’s conscious and active employment of language on a “typographic” micro-level. Her emphasis on Stein’s style and composition suggests that reading Stein’s work demands a greater attention than that of "ordinary book-making" and disrupts conventional expectations of meaning in works of literature (Moore 49). While this might imply a more formalist approach to Stein, I argue that her work atomizes words—especially *Tender Buttons*— to show how they achieve a particular effect, where that effect can be as political as it is epistemological. Through her use of language and her intervention in it, Stein reveals the danger of epistemology turning into its own meta-politics, whether or not it may confess to the intention. For this reason, Stein is unique among the modernists for her greater scrutiny on the internal structures of language while making indirect reference to the world outside of the text. Her works extend past her prose and poetry into essays on reading and writing, some of which are found in “Lectures in America” (1935), a written collection of six lectures on poetry, grammar, composition, and literature that she delivered to live American audiences. By engaging thoroughly in the writing practice, she both courts and defies the internal structures of language. Stein belongs to a very powerful and proactive group of 20th century writers who embedded theoretical and experimental views on language within their creative works of poetry, fiction, plays, and other forms of literature.

Engagement with Stein does not stop with her literary accomplishments: where her successes and failures, integrity and deceit, humanity and inhumanity lie in the grand scheme of

her work continually faces ongoing judgment. Stein is simply a figure who transcends her work: she is the avant-garde, the ignorant American, the literary cubist, the unapologetic lesbian. Wyndham Lewis, controversial modernist figure and co-founder of the Vorticist movement, deeply criticized the notion that Stein was cut off from the rest of the world “by an exclusive and peculiar sensibility” (Lewis 52) that he found to be merely literary fraud. Edmund Wilson, American literary critic, also mused upon her method of writing which he saw as absurd: “Gertrude Stein is said, at this period, to have made a practice of shutting herself up at night and trying utterly to banish from her mind all the words ordinarily associated with the ideas she had fixed upon” (Wilson 61). An exhibit of Stein’s life and work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art received strong criticism for leaving out the mention of Stein collaborationist activities with Bernard Fay, a prominent Vichy figure, undergoing a total of three textual changes for its description of Gertrude Stein. A kind of culpability seems to accompany any theory of formal hermeticism, as political motivations become more transparent within a particular style of language. Puzzling and polarizing, Stein’s inaccessibility both in her use of words and as a figure is a point of interest for critics and readers alike. I believe it is necessary to recognize the history of such responses to Stein in order to really ground *Tender Buttons* as a work that sets itself apart and in order to fully appreciate its distinctiveness.

Tender Buttons, a collection of poems published in 1914 divided into three sections named “Food,” “Objects,” and “Rooms,” holds a key to some of the aforementioned enigmas. “Objects,” which consists of “A Substance in a Cushion,” “A Box,” “A Piece of Coffee,” “Mildred’s Umbrella,” and others; “Food,” which consists of “Roastbeef,” “Mutton,” “Breakfast,” “Sugar,” and others; and “Rooms,” which is a single long-form poem, make up the over 90 objects defined in prose-poem format. Each poem is its own sphere of meaning,

navigating and challenging boundaries of definition through Stein's conscious typographical choices. Through the various word-objects of the work, Stein explores what it would look like if one "completely replaced the noun by the thing in itself," said in one of her lectures in America. She searches for a way of naming things that "would not invent names, but mean names without naming them" (Stein, "Poetry and Grammar" 1). The work is defined as one of the "most innovative and enigmatic of Gertrude Stein's major works" (Schmitz 120). The work, although located in the modernist movement, made apparent in the text's desire to break out of conventional structure and meaning, has received a strangely contested status in comparison to figures such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Stein herself almost did not publish this work, leaving it untitled until weeks prior to the official publication. This was mostly due to a dispute with Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy American patron of the arts who often supported Stein, about its publication. Luhan suggested that Stein's selection to publish under Claire Marie Press would only emphasize the public's understandings of the cubist movement— which Stein and Claire Marie Press were associated with— as decadent and Broadwayish. Stein did not publish another work until eight years later.

Several newspaper reviews from *The Chicago Tribune* or *The Pittsburg Post* that circulated shortly after the release of *Tender Buttons* made claims such as "she (Gertrude Stein) is having a sardonic joke at the expense of those who profess to believe in her" (*Chicago Tribune* 1914) or "to seek meaning in this strange rambling... would seem to be like turning one's back upon the key to them (words)" (*The Pittsburg Post* 1914). It is also interesting to consider just how *Tender Buttons* was advertised by Claire Marie Press, the first publisher of the work. The advertisement's language is highly sensationalized, calling Stein "one of the most puzzling figures in the literary world":

Those who are avid for the literature of to-morrow will find great satisfaction in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. It is one of the most unique books of the twentieth century... she is one of the most puzzling figures in the literary world, yet here-to-fore it has been practically impossible to obtain any of her books. Her work, privately printed, has been seen by but few, and although word of her art is in everyone's ears she has been a closed door to almost all save her intimates. Recently *The New York Sun* asked the question: Why has no publisher brought out the work of Gertrude Stein? The answer is a simple one—the obstacle was Gertrude Stein who steadfastly refused to give herself to a wider public. It has been only after months of persuasion and endeavor that her consent to the publication of this volume was finally obtained. (Claire Marie Press, *Yale Collection of American Literature*)

The inclusion of words such as “puzzling,” “practically impossible,” “seen by few... although word of her art is in everyone's ears,” “closed door,” “the obstacle was Gertrude Stein,” emphasize a surprising amount of energy in Gertrude Stein's inaccessibility. Even the situation of her work as a literature of “tomorrow” is an effort on Claire Marie Press' part to further iconize Gertrude Stein, setting her apart from her modernist contemporaries.

MODERNISM IN STEIN'S TIME

A series of changes in the social life of the twentieth-century, with the integration of “factory-production, new technologies of warfare, radio transmissions, phonographs, and telephones” is often regarded as the driving force within modernist writing: the “modernist fixation on noise” (Harris 58) and even its literary form that is “self-problematizing and self-undermining” (Tucker 6) are mainly considered as a response to the First World War and the detached industrial landscape. As T.S. Eliot, for example, shows the fragmented world of *The Waste Land* with its

dismembered structure and poetic sounds of dissonance, one might consider the contributions of the “unreal city” and its inhabitants, regarded as “the human engines,” to the disheveled condition of Eliot’s respective world. Others, however, consider the project of modernist writers in the utopian perspective, claiming that their resistance to the conventions of language was a proposal to “bettering the modern world” and went against the conventional understanding of a utopianism “transcending human nature”; instead, these twentieth century writers demonstrated, by circulating their poetry and prose, that “political action can bring about alteration in the human condition” (Tucker 6).

Considering the work of the modernist writer Wallace Stevens, who claims in “Adagia” that poetry can even take the place of a belief in god as “life’s redemption” (Stevens 158) there is undoubtedly what can be deemed as “an anxious utopianism” (Nickelks 19) that overwhelms the work of both Stevens and Eliot— who arguably gestures toward hope at the end of *The Waste Land*— in their means of resolving an imperfect and fallen world. Conventional understanding of the bodily senses— specifically sight and hearing— were transformed to fulfill these needs of reunification, healing, and completion of an understanding of the world. It is through sight and hearing that one is able to ultimately reach the understanding the world for what it is, and it is simultaneously that very sight and hearing that constructs that world: moreover, while the work creates its own realities through the technical usage of imagery and sound, the construction of poetry is fulfilled through sights and sounds that directly links it to the physical and “real” world. Sight and the ability to see, as well as hearing and the ability to hear, become the skills belonging to “the priest of the invisible” (Stevens 158) who is granted the truth and wisdom to fully belong to the world.

Other modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound responded by dismantling the known structure of language—calling for greater meaning and a rediscovery of solidity in a new unconventional order. While Gertrude Stein, in works such as *Picasso* and *Tender Buttons*, re-examines the individual word and elaborates on the mental processes that form its intuitive sense, Ezra Pound withdraws from language’s ornamentation into a more refined brevity— one that more closely aligns to the natural— especially explored within his imagist and his interest in Chinese poems and Chinese calligraphy through Ernest Feltonosa. It is Stein, however, who stands out in her invitational and open approach to language. She does not find freedom in refined structure; rather, she offers her thoughts on language and invites her readers to challenge their political environment. Her scrutinizing engagement with several and un-named forces of language may grant the assumption that Stein a part of high modernism: individuals who render the historical or geographical less important, and strive for a mastery of nature. However, one cannot deny the colloquial use of language that makes a statement against the high modernism of her time. I argue that Stein cannot be labelled as a high-modernist figure; rather, I see she is a modernist figure who poetically responds to values of tradition and individuality, enacting a kind of secularization and democratization of language. With language as a vortex of all social, historical, and political forces— it is within words that modernists find their revolution. It is here that I believe Stein should be considered a modern figure for all audiences who want to bring about change in language by fully claiming its intuitive, personalized reorganization.

GRAMMAR AND CONVENTION

In this thesis, I will use the terms “grammar” and “convention” when navigating how Stein deliberately challenges her word usage in her poems. Here is what Gertrude Stein means by grammar: she names grammar as “diagramming sentences.” Therefore, I will consider grammar

as the driving force in the conventional ordering of sentences, establishing relationships internally in order to produce meaning. It is, moreover, the push and pull between *la langue* and *la parole*, semantics and syntactics. We will see how Stein often aims for sentences to “diagram themselves” (Stein, “Poetry and Grammar” 1) as the poems become a highly coded user’s manual. Perhaps grammar does not have any power in itself— perhaps it is convention that controls how we choose to diagram sentences. Convention I will refer to as, in general, the societal norms that push sentences to be diagrammed a certain way, even further than grammar already does as a formal rule. Convention maintains itself through repetition of a particular kind of use throughout society. It shapes how words are used, when words are used, and how words are used. Grammar is the formal rule that forces words to be combined on the basis of subject and predicate, comma and period. Convention is the informal rule that raises an eyebrow when one uses the phrase “magnificent asparagus” (Stein, *Tender Buttons* 78). Because the two are in such close proximity, I argue that Stein has chosen to challenge both in her poetry in order to reclaim agency in her use of words. Agency means, in this case, a use of language where the human is absolutely needed, in full presence and consciousness. In doing so, she constantly shows strong choice and intention within the slippery medium of language— a language that Stein does not see as having a tangible presence behind its words. Stein's own version of meaning is upheld by her unique interpretation of grammar, and her active interpretation is a means in creating her own room within language.

OBJECTIVE

Overall, *Tender Buttons* has been criticized as a “modernist triumph, a spectacular failure, a collection of gibberish, and an intentional hoax” (Book Hug Press): its vision is at once radical but poorly understood. Its peripheral status is only enforced by the unsettled judgement on

Gertrude Stein as an artist, writer, author, and individual. Drawing on these tensions of Gertrude Stein's status in the social and literary world as a point of departure demands a careful, critical, and cautionary lens for closely reading *Tender Buttons*. In this thesis I will closely examine the way *Tender Buttons* lays bare the way color, sound, rhythm, grammar, and meaning are perceived in language, the relationship between language and systems of power and knowledge— knowledge of history, gender, ontology, the epistemology of language, language and being, and so on. I will be using Stein's very own methodology to interpret her work, revealing the deeper systems of power and knowledge in which the work is embedded. In this medium of poetry, Stein's words exist in their own space and ask their own questions. The strangeness of Stein's words, juxtaposed to the conventions of understanding and reading words, calls for new understanding of the unexplored idiosyncrasies of language. In her own words: "is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again" (Stein, *Tender Buttons* 11) To move past frameworks of understanding the world— to move past "green" merely pointing to "red"—is to engage in a revolution through language, if remembering that the very process of understanding is facilitated by language itself. The work gestures toward a potential freedom found in going back to the words themselves— the essence of how words come to be. I argue that though Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* seems to resist rationality and practicality, it only does so because it attempts to break through not only the structure that is language, but the many other structures tied within it socially and politically. For these same reasons, its failures are equally as important to consider. Undoubtedly, however, her view of language has political and ideological implications that have not been fully investigated, but are still deeply relevant for the understanding of words today.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The subsequent four chapters will put Gertrude Stein in dialogue with four language theorists from the twentieth century: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida and Valentin Voloshinov. I hope that placing Gertrude Stein in dialogue with popular language theorists will encourage further engagement with a considerably cryptic work. These dialogues are brief encounters with one or two concepts from each of these language theorists. These encounters are in hope of continued engagement in the future by others who may find the same resonance. The first chapter will be in dialogue with Ludwig Wittgenstein. In this chapter, I will compare Wittgenstein and Stein's engagement with the concept of repetition in language. What does repetition assume? What is the connection between repetition and identity? Is repetition a destabilizing act? In the next chapter, I will discuss a dance performance by the Nederland Dans Theatre in connection with Julia Kristeva and Gertrude Stein. Their performance is a unique interpretation of language and the body: as the two individuals dance to Gertrude Stein's voice reading her poem, one may observe theory in bodily practice. What is the relationship between language and the body? How do formal elements of language, such as syntax, impose themselves upon the body? After this chapter, I will examine Jacques Derrida's ideas of the "dangerous supplement" within Gertrude Stein's project as a whole. What is the intended purpose of Stein's exploration in language in the context of a century that begins to reject "logo-centrism?" The last chapter will explore Gertrude Stein's long prose poem "Rooms." I will use a room as a metaphor for the sign that simultaneously encases what is inside and reflects what is outside. This will be facilitated by Valentin Voloshinov's theories of the sign, particularly his idea on how signs reflect an embodied historical moment.

STEIN AND WITTGENSTEIN: Words, Repetition, and Identity

But isn't the same at least the same? We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself. I feel like saying: "Here at any rate there can't be a variety of interpretations. If you are seeing a thing you are seeing identity too. Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what one thing shews to the case of two things?"

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)

With its subject matter consisting of boxes, petticoats, or cucumbers, *Tender Buttons* renders itself, at first, familiar; however, moving beyond the poems' titles and into the poems themselves, this familiarity is immediately undermined by Stein's structural play with words. It is the formatting of the poems themselves— their titles, their content, and the relationship between the two— that first makes the familiar unfamiliar by disrupting readers' expectations of conventional methods of defining words. Through a destabilization of words, the poems further dismantle the familiar objects— mutton, roastbeef, milk, eggs, apple— that are often left unquestioned through their familiarity. More than the poems bring life back into words— or as Stein has put it: more than the poems tap into "the vast pool of living words that swirled around me" (Watson 17)— they comment on the false impression of stability associated with a word's identity upheld by the external form of its letters.

But what does it mean for an object to be familiar or for us to be familiar with an object? It may be, in part, recognizability: to be able to identify something from having encountered it before; or it may be mundanity: to be unarguably related to this world or this earth, and to be common and generally known. Familiarity is, in many cases, a passive process— a result of some visual assemblage that has made its impression on us at a point in time which we half-recognize at a later point in time; it is seen to be a part of a known class or family. It is useful for readers of Stein to turn to her contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein, an influential philosopher

most known for his work in the philosophy of language, mind, and logic, and mathematics. Concerned with the process of recognition and familiarity and its consequences for human knowledge, Wittgenstein asks in bewilderment: “Isn’t the same at least the same?” Here we bring this question into language. As we see Stein’s deliberate use of repetition in her poetry, we may ask the very same questions regarding the identity of a single word. Does repetition of a word carry something with it? Does a word have something inside of itself? An identity that cannot be disrupted? Or does the repeating of its letters— its outward appearance— give a false impression of an infallible paradigm of identity?

In *Tender Buttons*, I argue, Stein studies the extent to which identity— which finds itself through this repeating of structure whether visual, verbal, sonic— relies on unique moments of re-affirmation. By using repetition in her poetry, Stein shows how repetition is, in fact, a destabilizing act. Moreover, she shows how words will always have an existence outside their human utterance and outside of the page; how repetition is never simply a thing repeated; and how repetition does not have *sound* authority. She exposes the undistinguishable boundary between sound as sound and sound as a component of meaning making. In this chapter, I will first observe the way Stein uses repetition in the poem “Mildred’s Umbrella.” I will then explain repetition as shown in Stein’s use of language and how this use dismantles the stability of this formal element of language. Using these observations, I will draw out what I perceive to be Stein’s larger project: to reject repetition and see new in the same.

REPETITION IN “MILDRED’S UMBRELLA”

MILDRED'S UMBRELLA.

A cause and no curve, a cause and loud enough, a cause and extra a loud clash
and an extra wagon, a sign of extra, a sac a small sac and an established color and
cunning, a slender grey and no ribbon, this means a loss a great loss a restitution. (13)

Stein’s use of repetition may initially seem unnecessary, redundant and nonsensical among other words of the poem that do not clarify what she really means by “cause,” “extra,” or “sac.” Stein seems to be defamiliarizing language through the repetition of words, playing with the boundaries of sense and non-sense. By repeating a single word, she draws attention to its sound, its meaning, its relationship to other words in the poem. As a result, Stein not only looks at sense and non-sense; she looks at sameness and difference. It is significant that, for example, with the word “cause,” that Stein uses “a” to establish its independence: it is not “cause,” it is “a cause.” The word cause, moreover, is both a word in itself *and* a logical construct. The poem draws attention to the being and rationale of language, questioning its identity: whether language is solely made for the purposes of logic and what it means to exist wholly and solely in the world of words. The relationship of “a cause” to other words is denoted with “and,” a conjunction used only if the words before and after the “and” can operate on their own as an individual unit; the “and” works to merely supplement what is already whole. Ironically, drawing to the singularity and individuality of a word complicates its wholeness; it is unclear what is being repeated with the case of “cause,” for example. It may be merely the sound, its semantic meaning— where established convention provides it— the letters themselves, or the referent that exists outside the text. Echoing Wittgenstein, one may ask: “then are two things the same when they are what one thing is?” Is repetition when a thing is repeated exactly the same, again and

again? Or is the reappearance of a word— though exact, though a duplicate— somehow calling out to something different than its first appearance, somehow drawing attention to its own individual instability?

Let us focus on the repetition of “cause.” Cause itself is a perfect example because of its dynamism and power, its relationship to agency. We have the presence of “cause” three times in the poem just within the first line. Attached to this word are the phrases “and no curve,” “and loud enough” and “extra a loud clash.” There are three emphases being made: no deviation, something sufficient, and something noticeably additional. These differences, moreover, are being placed against the stability of the word “cause.” “Cause” takes on a very appropriate double meaning: its literal definition as the root of something and its function in the poem as a word that deliberately repeats three times against the variation of other details. As a repeated word, it causes the other words to behave distinctively. For the poem’s case, Stein plays with this notion of difference alongside sameness, particularly the sameness that is the word “cause”; here, “and no curve,” “and loud enough,” “and extra a loud clash” are given individual status, again facilitated against by the use of the conjunction “and.” Difference and sameness shift their status as background and foreground. The way these phrases are given individual status raises the question whether a difference constitutes its own state or whether it is merely a backdrop used to supplement the identity of something considered whole. Repetition of a word, moreover, creates a hegemonic relationship with the words that are considered the differences— “and no curve,” “and loud enough,” “and extra a loud clash”— even if they possess individual status. Notions of adequacy or being “enough” seem to surround the words of this poem. “Cause” may not be “enough” on its own, without difference. The word only establishes its power in the poem through its reappearance. It is as if it must reappear again, though in uncertainty. Moreover, as a

result of not being “enough,” the word repeats itself again, as if making a re-proclamation of itself. The words themselves are unsure of their ontological plentitude. This places wholeness of “cause” into question, where this wholeness does not seem to be entirely present even through its repetition. Judgement, power, and assumption are involved in the process of determining the original “cause” and the original identity of something as it becomes solidified into a proper category, as it finally carries a sense of belonging and propriety, and as it ultimately becomes a kind of one.

NEW KNOWLEDGE

Stein claims that in her portraits— more appropriately considered word-portraits— she “was making a continuous succession of a statement... until [she] had not many things but one thing... each time there was a difference just a difference enough so that it could go on and be a present something” (“Portraits and Repetition” 295). Stein aims for a presence and presentness in language, one that she must strain into existence. “Mildred’s Umbrella,” indeed, is a succession of a statement until it reaches its supposed completion. The poem itself is a single, three-line sentence. However, Stein’s phrases are also separated by commas, indicating an appositional, non-hierarchical relationship between the phrases (and phases) of the sentence. Each phrase stands on its own; each phrase is *just enough* to warrant a use of a comma, a mode of horizontal separation. What Stein is doing here is a kind of word pluralization, calling attention to the multiplicity of meaning and showing the word as an ongoing temporal process. As the use of repetition implies finality and totalization of meaning and identity, the poem works against it; it instead shows a very *alive* succession of thoughts that is present in every word or thing. She derails the objective of repetition by her practice of repetition, showing that repetition may be performative rather than pedagogical. Moreover, when repetition is done for the sake of

repetition— where its objective is recurrence— it becomes an irresolvable task to claim an identity that is fully repeatable. Repetition, in a temporal sense of language, carries with it the act of remembrance and confusion as a result of succession in time. Moreover, each time the word “cause” appears, it relates to its previous mentioning; its reappearance confuses prior clarity. What is a cause? What type of cause is being mentioned? Who or what is causing? Words themselves, even under the rouse of grammar, are constantly moving and shifting.

Stein’s use of repetition also resonates with a question she asks in another work: “Is there repetition or is there insistence?” (“Portraits and Repetition” 288) Stein poses that there can be no repetition because “the essence of that expression is insistence”; moreover, in its emphasis, in its demand, in its being brought to life again through the hand of the writer, in its reappearance in the mind, in its insistence, there can never be merely the repeating of an expression or a word. The act of insistence grants the writer extra linguistic agency, where they must decide what repeats and how it repeats— to clarify and show intention on what is *insisted* upon. It is through the temporal and spatial existence of the writer themselves that provides the *insistence*, the re-incarnation of a word into the world. As insistence is always alive as an assertion or reassertion, it immediately negates the notion of repetition: there can be no repetition, there is only insistence. Where there is insistence, there cannot be repetition. “If you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (288), Stein says, commenting on how insistence undermines the indivisibility and stability that the repetition of a word or expression might imply. While Stein discusses repetition and insistence, she seems to be asking for either a reconsideration of what it means to repeat something or for the abandonment of the notion of repetition in place of a more accurate term: insistence. There is a desire to recognize that repetition is inherently an active and

conscious act. The identity of a word, the identity of a thing with a thing-in-itself, is never as stable: words and things are always alive, in flux with the world around them. Each of Stein's words explore their field of presence, holding meaning of her words still in the place where they emerge. To do this is to claim ownership of knowledge through the act of interpretation—to reclaim words and make a whole world within the words themselves. It is up to the writer and the speaker to reclaim the life within language, to know what they mean and to extend the possibilities of what they can mean.

UNDERMINING AUTHORITY

The project of "Mildred's Umbrella" is more than introducing freedom of knowledge through one's own method of language. Repetition in Stein's poem, like these established notions of "sex, words, or colors," (Schmitz 129) carries with it a kind of authority simply by reappearing over and over again in the particular space. Repetition asserts its exterior word-body, claiming power and dominance in the midst of other words; it is terminal and finalizing, at the same time pedagogical, and at the same time rhetorical. Repetition is used to establish authority, ritual, rules, rule, allegiance, convention—by simply drawing attention to the mode of repetition in poetry, Stein opens up the discussion of the way repetition is used in all other parts of human life. She exposes repetition as an act of *compulsion*, a symptom of basic uncertainty, despite its stable word-body. With the poem's discussion of an unreliable boundary between difference and sameness, readers are invited to question our way of looking at the world, then to look again. In the midst of a twentieth century technological boom and two world wars, Stein's reality is very much "stifling in its systems" and "overfed with information" (Schmitz 129). Sameness and difference has its role not only in words, but within the social world—where convention seems to decide who is considered the "cause" and who is considered "signs of extra." In this case,

language exemplifies the social world, and in another conversation, it may very well constitute it. A return to words reclaims the fundamental way we come to know and make sense of the world. The rejection of repetition is the freedom to find new in the same: to see a mundane world and claim its revitalization. Mimicking how Stein simply takes convention—the concept of repetition for example—and interprets it by incorporating her idea of insistence, one may find the new everywhere they look. By doing this, Stein avoids sameness and difference; she merely interprets and makes it new, incorporating her ideas into the system and simultaneously redefining the system. It is the kind of interpretation that individuals can use to reclaim their agency, to choose to be the foreground, in language and even in their society. With repetition as a *cardinal* and *ordinal* force, there is both a crisis and liberation in knowing that there is a kind of *non-identical* repetition. Perpetuation and insistence must take its place, embodied in the society that gives the thing repeated new life.

Gertrude Stein, Julia Kristeva, and *Nederlands Dans Theatre*: Language, Breath and the Body

The human body and meaning, inseparable as they are, thus fashion a dismembered score; a halt in breathing and syntactic finitude, also inseparable, are thus given a new start, but in a different logical realm...

— Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (1969)

An audio recording of Gertrude Stein's voice prompts Spencer Dickhaus and Imre van Opstal from the *Nederlands Dans Theatre* to begin their dance routine on the fifth floor of The Met Breuer (Lightfoot and Leon). The two align themselves beside one another in a way that the museum describes as "a diabolical, rhythmical set of movements, which translates Gertrude Stein's proto-verbal words into pure emotion." This description alone associates Stein's language with a pre-linguistic world on the cusp of its linguistic manifestation; there is something chaotic or even unknown— fearful and devilish— about her conception of language. In fact, it is a world in its "Chora" stage: an early stage of development where reality is merely a "chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings, and needs" (Felluga, *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* 83), where the self is not distinct from the surrounding world and exists without boundaries. While they move, Stein's poem "'If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso'" projects itself into the air of the room:

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him.

Their movements are noticeably mesmerizing and idiosyncratic, a style that appropriately embodies the quality of Stein's words. But more importantly, for the purpose of this chapter, their movements are incredibly coordinated, precise, timely; they are staccato yet fluid,

managing an odd sense of unbreached continuity. In many ways, their movements are breath-like, inhaling and exhaling at the expense of the Stein's words; moreover, the words subsidize the breath of the dancers— claiming a part of their breath in order to cause an unconscious movement within them. Whether the dancers or the words are in control, however, remains questionable. To submit language to dance implies there is something else being said than the very thing being said, with the something else being said unable to manifest in the very medium it finds itself embedded within. Emotive and sensual language have the capacity to manipulate our bodies and our minds, driving us mad and eliciting feelings that must be located, interpreted, or compartmentalized though it may resist to doing so— perhaps as a result of perpetual clashing meanings. However, this is the work that Stein designates to the human; she does not deny the capability of the human to gradually make this subconscious or unconscious force appear through a little giving.

The Nederlands Dans Theatre, a Dutch contemporary dance company, is not the first artistic engagement with Stein's words. Art historian Janet Hobhouse engaged with Gertrude Stein by writing a biography *Everybody Who Was Anybody*. British indie electronic band Broadcast released an album called *Tender Buttons* (2005), a nod to Gertrude Stein's collection and a homage to her use of words. Jordan Nelson composed a series of musical panels for soprano and string quartet also called *Tender Buttons* (2016), inspired by internal rhythms and “curious oddity” (Nelson 1) of the work. It is interesting, moreover, to turn towards the artistic mediums as an interpretation of Stein's work— an interpretation that exceeds conventional modes of textual criticism.

The dance performed by *NDT*, I argue, serves as a more transparent interpretation of Stein's words. Stein's words feel as though they have come from a *living* body. The relationship

between *NDT's* dance to language of *Tender Buttons* is well illuminated by Julia Kristeva's ideas of the body and language. Considering the dance routine as its own art form separate from the poem, the movements of these dancers provide an interesting visual and bodily manifestation of a word's sound. In their routine, each word corresponds with a particular gesture and remains loyal to that gesture upon its repetition. On the one hand, the awkwardness of Dickhaus and van Opstal's bodily positions draws attention to its status as a highly choreographed and calibrated movement. Their exactitude suggests an interesting relationship between a word, a sound, and its role in the body: it implies that a word's sound (or the word itself in all its semantic entirety) carves a place in the body that is singular, final, and bounded. This is apparent at least in the time of this dance routine where the two dancers are responding to a particular poem, which carries its own bounded rhythms within its formal space and its own bounded use of particular words, where the use of particular words may vary with context. The body's reaction to a particular word, moreover, seems to exist in a one to one relationship where a particular sound will always only have a particular response within the body. Ultimately, this aspect of the routine draws attention to the rigidity of form— where the word is a type of form upheld by its letters— and the way it unavoidably transfers this rigidity over to the body. On the other hand, the dance routine exposes the sensual and natural aspects of language: its sounds and how the human body receives them. Arising from just the sounds of words, Dickhaus and van Opstal were able to generate an entirely new work of art through the medium of dance. While their response displays a kind of sensual pleasure in Gertrude Stein's poetry, it also shows that words have an uncontrollable dimension of sound that, in many ways, is separate from their role in society as words. Though the social aspect of words is certainly uncontrollable by the way they are dictated by convention and also received by society, words themselves— without this social aspect—

already demonstrate an uncontrollability. Sounds within words may have an unconscious effect on the body, compelling a particular type of internal or external movement. Ultimately, words are in tension with the bounds that they are given.

Let us keep in mind the correlation between words, their sounds, and the human body as demonstrated by these dancers in response to Stein's poetry. Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language* claims that there is a correlation between the human body and meaning; a halt in breathing and syntactic finitude (Kristeva 169). While the dancers show how sounds of words can in fact move our body in particular ways, Kristeva shows how the act of receiving meaning from words can also move our bodies. In other words, even the way we breathe— where we choose to pause, take a breath, and draw in new life— is inextricably tied to how we process logic. It is interesting to consider where we choose to breathe while reading a sentence: at times, the locations where we pause within a sentence are determined by syntax, where we see “finite” or “complete” clauses arranged and assembled; other times, it is determined by punctuation, line breaks, or other grammatical markers of finitude. Where we take a breath, moreover, is often a response to formal elements within language. And according to Kristeva, where we choose to breathe influences how logic is processed within our minds— where it pauses, settles, and begins again. For the dancers, this sense of location is equally important: words are given a particular location within time and space. Together, Nederlands Dans Theatre, Julia Kristeva, and Gertrude Stein ultimately reveal to us an overlooked relationship between grammar and the body, emphasizing and revealing once again the compulsion of bodily receptivity in language. Their theories suggest that the body is already a primordial language to be repeated into formal language, that the realm of the pre-logical has always existed within and its trace is brought out once again each time we allow ourselves to be amenable to language.

THE LOGIC OF BREATH IN “GLAZED GLITTER”

This connection between finitude of breath and logic is echoed in a part of Gertrude Stein’s poem “Glazed Glitter,” where Stein draws attention to this complicity as a possible epistemic problem.

The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly, glittering is handsome and convincing. (9)

As the poem claims “red weakens an hour,” there seems to be an acknowledgement of temporality as having a role in processing language. Where “red” can be interpreted as a symbol for a stop, pause, or finitude, this necessity to stop seems to negatively interfere with the allotment of a full length of time. As a result, language wanes in meaning and perception is lost— a fading retina froth never to be materialized. The statement implies that though there is an hour, it is made less effective because the processing of logic cannot simply be perfect and continuous; it is rugged and fragmented. This fragmentation largely occurs because the words must be taken in by the body, processed at a certain point in time, thereby limiting their potential for new and unbounded meaning. For this reason, Stein views pausing as an interruption, a “sinecure” that provides only the *appearance* of meaning—one that is neatly organized by convention— but, in fact, hides from us meaning that would open itself to us if we allowed it more time to speak. Moreover, the word “sinecure” is a cheap rendering of language, losing the value that it could have in place of a logo-centric status. Along with Julia Kristeva’s claim that logic and syntax compose a kind of “dismembered score” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 169),

Stein's words reveal an "equivalence between abstract qualities of consciousness and formal qualities of language." Within Gertrude Stein's work, a particular pulse (density, continuity, speed, quantity) of consciousness becomes a particular kind of "syntax, phrasing rhythm, diction, tone" (DeMcKoven 38). The mind and body both influence how language is conceived but are also at the will of language's formal composition when processing logic. As Stein's poem says "red weakens an hour," it seems to comment that the density of thought somehow decreases due to a pause— a pause that the "red" suggests is even violent or corporeal.

(DIS-)/(RE-) CONNECTING THE BODY WITH LANGUAGE

The theoretical and rhetorical move to link language with the body, and not just the mind, is a significant one. It requires first to define the body. For both Kristeva and Stein, this linkage appears dismembered, almost mechanical. The mechanical seems to offer itself as a new metaphor on how convention influences the body, as if grammar is merely an assemblage of parts and as the body is being controlled by them. However, this grappling with language can also be seen as a *freeing* of the body. One may either view their bodies as mechanical and their relationship to language as a kind of factory owner; or, one may reclaim their bodies as the natural, living being that is meant to create. In both cases, the assertion of some kind of control becomes necessary.

Let us turn back to the words of Stein. The poem continues, but "the change has come." This line raises the question of what should change, what is changing or what will change. In the world of language and grammar, one clause changes to the next. There is syntactical pause; there is then the resuming of logical activity. The formal choices within language reflect how meaning is produced and understood by the outside world; its fragmentation through syntactical structures

encourages compartmentalization of meaning. After a syntactic halt, meaning is given a “new start, but in a different logical realm” (Kristeva 169). This resonates with the poem’s claim that “there is no search.” Stein’s claim is dismissive; something is lost when there is a change. What exists is only the “hope” and “interpretation” that there is still a search— however, in the end, something is lost or left behind. What is left behind in Kristeva’s case is a continuation of a kind of logic. When there is breath, the idea of meaning departing into a “different logical realm” is complex: this “different logical realm” is, after all, still within the realm of logic. This different logical realm can be seen, then, as a different logical trajectory that departs from its point of logical origin. There seems to be a rigidness here on the poem’s judgment: it matters if logic is given a different genealogy. However, it is more the point that there is unexplored territory within an arrangement of words before moving on for the sake of logic. Though this points to an understanding of logic as a horizontal movement— as if a sentence is a car, where its motor is stirred by an internal impulse within us. Both Stein and Kristeva seem to view the way logic moves through syntax as a type of breath, where breath is part language and part body.

This type of breath is, however, both “dismembered” (Kristeva 169) and “unwelcome” (Stein. *Tender Buttons* 9). For Stein, breath is merely a low labor act that receives overcompensation for its role in the rendering of logic. The logical pause that breathing provides is “charming,” “handsome,” and “convincing”; but syntactical finitude and breathing only grant the façade of logical cleanliness and clarity. By claiming it is “convincing,” Stein gestures to a critique on systems of logic by suggesting some pretense may be involved. Various systems of logic operate on the basis of placing together concrete fragments (i.e. propositions) and deriving conclusions from them; and though this type of logic may *appear* logically sound, a Steinian observation would suggest this logical soundness is merely rhetorical and as seductive as “glazed

glitter.” But there is tension here. If Stein claims breathing and pausing do not serve our logical understanding of the world, this does not lend itself to a straight-forward solution when considering breath is an inevitable part of the human body— the body that facilitates language. Stein herself claims that “inevitably no matter how complete I had to have writing go on, physically one had to again and again stop sometime” (“Poetry and Grammar” 2). With this claim she implies that logical cleanliness is nearly impossible while inherently affirming that free-flowing, unrestrained, stream-of-*unconsciousness* language grants us the best possible access to meaning— the language that she fittingly uses throughout *Tender Buttons*. Stein does not mourn the loss of logical cleanliness. Instead, she says at the end of her poem that “there is some use in giving.” Somehow one should not rely on breath— a sinecure— but one should find it within to give to words, to give to a sentence, to give to language. It is only through the act of giving and providing one’s own breath that meaning can be furthered and pushed past its “borrowing” of logic: a structure of logic provided by conventions of the sentence and by the conventions of grammar.

AGENCY

While Stein pushes for the act of giving, Kristeva and the *Nederlands Dans Theatre* dance to the dismembered score of language. Though language in its current structure of rendering logic and meaning is dismembered, it nonetheless inhales and exhales like our very human bodies. What both Kristeva and Spencer Dickhaus and Imre van Opstal from *NDT* draw our attention to is the paradoxical relationship that we have to breathing: it is simultaneously natural, mechanical, constructed, and subconscious. And because of the relationship Stein, *NDT*, and Kristeva see that breathing has to words, language too is simultaneously natural, mechanical, constructed, and subconscious. The observer of language is only left desiring, dancing, responding and

contemplating its limitations with other forms of art. It is Stein, however, that pushes for the programming of language through a unique organization of words at the level of the grammar. Though grammar seems to take from language, Stein recognizes that it provides language with its own unique modality. It is a choice to be made how this modality is to be gently placed onto language, vulnerable to grammar's touch. Observing language at the level of grammar is where Stein can return to the "proto-verbal": she takes an active role while not necessarily rejecting the capabilities of words; rather, she cultivates new aspects of words through her method of form. After all, "composition is everything" ("Composition as Explanation" 1). For Stein, we must pull the psychic energy from our bodies in order to re-organize language. We re-mechanize language and our bodies are the life source. Though we may seem like mechanical beings ourselves, Stein argues for the power of the individual: the only real life source is that of the human, and language needs us. By reorganizing form, Stein changes the way we breathe when we read her words, granting them new artificial life, and inviting us to give our own.

STEIN AND DERRIDA: The De-Centering of Language

From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center... This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse...

— Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1970)

"ACT SO THAT THERE IS NO USE IN A CENTRE": Gertrude Stein makes this powerful statement in the final section of *Tender Buttons*, commanding her audience with an evocative deconstructionist mantra. Thirty years later, Jacques Derrida makes a resonant conclusion: "From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center." Derrida, Algerian-born French post-structuralist philosopher and Stein, American novelist, poet, and playwright who lived in France, have yet more in common in their approach to language. Hidden throughout *Tender Buttons* is, I argue, a similar Derridean ambition to critique the upholding of logo-centrism in Western metaphysics (and moreover, language). This is the idea that understanding and perfectly self-present meaning are guaranteed in language. It is also the idea that speech, thought, law, and reason are the principle purpose of language.

More specifically for our discussion, logo-centrism holds the observation that written words are merely derived from speech. They hold no explored relevance of their own and are given a "negative valuation" (Spivak xxiv). Derrida draws his critique in response to Rousseau's reflections on writing, where Rousseau names writing as merely a "dangerous supplement" to speech; writing is only to capture a presence that is not found within speech. Moreover, in the logic of Rousseau, writing becomes merely an exterior and marginalized practice.

However, Derrida, alike Stein, rejects the marginalization of writing and seeks to explore what writing itself really means. Fellow modernist Williams Carlos Williams claimed Stein placed "writing on a plane where it may deal unhampered with its own affairs, unburdened with

scientific and philosophic lumber" (Williams 56). Therefore her poems are particularly interesting for the perspective they provide on the practice of writing: How does she engage with words in a way that is different than representational writing— writing that acts as an inadequate substitute for speech?

It is difficult to name and categorize exactly what Stein's writing does. The poems can be seen, on the hand, as enacting a critique on "unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial presentness" being privileged over "distance, difference, dissimulation and deferment" (Johnson viii) within a Westernized understanding of language. On the other hand, the poems perform the style of writing that Stein sees as the adequate treatment of language in a post-logo-centric understanding of writing. This entails, first, the "diffusion of a center" and introduction "of many possible centers" (Hadas 58). In order to achieve this, Stein disperses meaning throughout her poems, only allowing meaning to be derived in moments rather than as a whole; meaning is atomized rather than organized. The second is complicating the notion of difference: either between "concept" and "phonetic material" (Derrida, "Dissemination" 2) or between concept and concept. Moreover, distinctions within language become unclear. The third is undecidability, demonstrated by how Stein troubles binaries, dualisms and dichotomies in language. I argue that by employing these ideas within her poems, Stein exposes a language that does not fit into its own conventions, gesturing towards something bigger or larger *than* language and *within* language.

DISPERSION

One way that Stein's poems can be grasped is through moments of recognition. Recognition occurs when the words of the poem follow the familiar rules of grammar and readers are able to grasp a moment that *means*. Some examples are statements such as "show the choice" or "secure

the steady rights” (*Tender Buttons* 76) where the words are organized into a statement— by subject, verb, and predicate. Her other poems, however, will complicate the way one can arrive at meaning: how, though meaning *seems* to appear when the rules of grammar are in place, it may remain suspended in time and resist resolving itself. Now we will turn to “A Red Hat” where dispersion is a function of the poem:

A dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinarily, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it. If red is in everything it is not necessary. Is that not an argument for any use of it and even so is there any place that is better, is there any place that has so much stretched out. (17)

Meaning seems to appear in the poem in these following places: “dark grey is monstrous,” “because,” “there is no red,” and “it is not necessary.” The poem relies on the presence of the verb “to be” to fulfill its pursuit of meaning, as well as a casual relation established by the word “because.” Though a relationship is established, it is not clear how one part of the sentence constitutes the other. The poem must confess that its meaning still remains elusive; we only take away the poem’s assertion: dark grey is monstrous because there is no red. As the phrase itself does not make its presence and existence concrete, the poem further suspends its meaning by proposing hypothetical situations: for example, “if red is in everything.” It also asks questions that cannot be answered: “is that not an argument,” “even so,” “is there.” The poem suggests that arrival to meaning often relies on imaginary logic— one that requires faith to fulfill. Perhaps, the reader might arrive at the conclusion that grey *is* monstrous: repulsive, evil, looming. Perhaps that is simply what the writer thinks and they have thought the words to life. Either way, meaning remains dispersed and fragmented; it is located elsewhere than within the words

themselves, only within the words themselves, and throughout different moments in time. It is spatially and temporally fleeting— it is “stretched out.”

UNDECIDABILITY

Dispersion of meaning may lead us to undecidability: the inability to make a conclusive statement about an arrangement of words and the moments in language where there is an irresolvable logic. Stein plays with the dichotomy of “front” and “behind,” for example, in “An Umbrella”: “Coloring high means that the strange reason is in front not more in front behind” (22). Let us examine the phrase “reason is in front not more in front behind.” The word front is used to indicate a force of active positioning: *in* front. However, front cannot exist without behind. The confusion in this phrase is caused by an active positional force inherent in the word “behind”: it is almost necessary that we turn our heads backwards when we hear the word, or that we prepare ourselves to imagine an amount of distance within our minds. However, the poem shows that “behind” can exist as its own entity and hold the status of a noun; it is its own stable and fixed object. The first sentence of the poem might read, for example, “reason is... not more in front [the] behind” rather than “not more in front [than] behind.” Yet, interestingly, Stein finds a way to suspend us mid-air, unsure of where one term ends and the other begins. Without any particular article or preposition before the word “behind,” we are left to draw the relationship ourselves and contemplate the status of “behind.” If something is not more in front *the* behind, than it is, in fact, the thing that is behind. This clever arrangement of language switches the values of the objects: behind is front and front is behind. As a result, the function of the dichotomy collapses, revealing that difference is the same.

THE SENSIBLE AND THE INTELLIGIBLE

In the poem “Eating,” Stein pulls out the tension between “separate irreplaceable singularity and machine-like repeatability” (Derrida, Stanford Dictionary). It is difficult to distinguish, based on sound, the actual concept being mentioned:

Eat ting, eating a grand old man said roof and never never re soluble burst...

Is it so a noise to be is it a least remain to rest, is it a so old say to be, is it a leading are been. Is it so, is it so, is it so, is it so is it so is it so. [...] Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating. He heat eating. (56)

We will look at this poem as deliberate play between sound and concept. Stein plays with “eating” as “eat ting,” further complicating it with “eating he heat it eating.” The word’s singularity— eating— is disrupted and fragmented; “eat” and “heat” become blurred. The proximity brings out the tension between concepts similar in sound, but different in meaning; for a moment, arbitrariness peeks through the conceptual singularity of these words. Here I argue that Stein points to slippage within language, creating it so that readers may understand how our relationship to words needs to be revised. She asks, “Is it so?” interrogating her readers to challenge their understanding of words as a “soluable burst”: an adequate merging of sound and concept within the single moment of its utterance. It is not only the words themselves that contribute to one’s knowledge of an object: it is words “and the sounds they produce” (Frank 507). The sounds have a greater presence – after all – in our everyday speech. But Stein is not merely mimetic in her approach to sounds; in writing, sounds have a presence in the visual— where sound is uniquely enhanced by their capability to be seen. Across the poem, our eyes are drawn to the “s” and the “h” and the “eat” and the “I”— and the sounds come with them in our

mouths. Stein draws attention to the “sensory aspect of her word choices” (Frank 507), pointing out the sensory is not particularly loyal to its embodiment within the conceptual realm of words.

DECONSTRUCTION, POST-STRUCTURALISM, MODERNISM OR SOMETHING ELSE?

By exploring a Derridean analysis within *Tender Buttons*, we can see that the text anticipates the ideas of deconstruction, though deconstruction in Derrida’s text comes almost fifty years later. *Tender Buttons* renders and demonstrates the theoretical in the poetic, giving the reader the experience of a new use and execution of language. Without the theoretical framework of *Tender Buttons* laid out for readers to interpret the many ways the poem wants to use language, the text will always resist fitting into one particular theoretical movement: deconstructive and post-structural are only two of many descriptors. It is undoubtedly a text that stretches and undermines the boundaries that we are given for language— but not with pessimism. A certain playfulness and didacticism brings forth its invitation to readers to not say language is arbitrary and contains no meaning, but rather: we have been given a language with a set of rules, but do not forget we are free to make it our own.

Stein and Voloshinov: Language of Resistance in “Rooms”

A sign does not simply exist as a part of reality— it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore, it may distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view, and so forth...

— Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929)

A room is public and private, bounded and filled, a de-lineation and a de-marcation; a room is the twentieth century preoccupation of Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys; a space through which things move, a space where ideas are shared or art is shown, a space through which one gains a sense of ownership. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 4) and she must have a money and room to if she is to write *poetry*. “Rooms” is the final poem of *Tender Buttons*. The two previous sections, “Food” and “Objects,” contain over forty poems of short and medium length while “Rooms” stands apart as entirely self-contained. Gertrude Stein’s language play is fully at hand in this long prose-poem, composed of more than twenty paragraphs of varying length that all address a new idea or impulse within their own space. Her interest in rooms is easily noted by recalling the history of her art salon in France on 27 Rue de Fleurs or her prominently celebrated domestic life with her partner Alice B. Toklas.

In the case and context of *Tender Buttons*, I argue Stein’s treatment of grammar is *as if* it is a room. Grammar is bounded; it has walls, or rules, but is free for re-organization, adjustment, and the switching of its inner parts. One may switch the fundamental tables or chairs or simply re-style its aesthetic, like how one may produce meaning through their own organization of a formal space— a poem, narrative, or grammar— in language. For Stein, organization could arise through "some mysterious, gender-free 'care' that perhaps ruled with a wisdom we cannot grasp"

(Wight 8). In either case, the reorganization of space is an announcement of a particular *lifestyle*— a way of being in the world.

With texts such as “How to Write,” “Poetry and Grammar,” and “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein’s critical attention to grammar falls in line with the rise of structural language theorists in the twentieth century. Valentin Voloshinov claims that the historical situation is inseparable from the words themselves; the historical situation “engenders the utterance” and is “individual and unreproducible” (99). Valentin Voloshinov, a direct contemporary of Stein and a Soviet/Russian linguist influential in the field of literary theory, provides us with a useful interpretive tool to contextualize *Tender Buttons* in its own societal room. Stein herself says “each generation has something different at which they are all looking” (“Composition as Explanation” 1). Using Voloshinov, we can expose Stein’s motivations and see the theme of her work arise as the modernist, feminist work that it may be, where her “hermetic works document [her] hidden feminist struggle for room in space for herself as a self-respecting woman and artist” (Wight 5). Using Stein, we can stretch the limits of how a sign can reflect a reality and simultaneously refract it. Any change in language connects with, is influenced by, and influences the outside world. Her “disorderly things” (Wight 8)— her treatment of space and perspective— approach an auto-generative mode of being within the bounds of grammar; I see this as a resistance and response to the space in which she is denied by her society.

In this essay, I will treat each analysis of the text as a room in which we will be visiting. We will explore its concepts and see which are bounded, expanded, and being replaced. I argue that seeing grammar as a way into a system— in this case, the system of language— is an untouched room that Stein decorates and inhabits. Whether or not we are asked to employ this grammar ourselves, it demonstrates how Stein takes the words at hand—language as oppressive,

taken for granted, liberating, intertwined with our lives as it is— and explores fundamentally how we can garner revolution starting with a single word. I will also examine how, alike Woolf, Stein contemplates what it means to have a room as a writer of language, with words tied to the economy through the selling of books and, consequently, bound to society.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF A LANGUAGE ROOM

Through the phenomena that is the selling of books, language makes its way outside of itself into a system of monetization. Words must be organized a certain way in order to be profitable-- to appeal to a society with particular values, ideas, or expectations of language. Whether or not this relationship is necessarily dialectical, with one affecting another, it is still a way that language finds itself inhabiting a particular *room*. As reflected by a passage from Stein's "Rooms," a kind of organization makes up the inside of the room; its meaning to the public is viewed through the outside:

A success, a success is alright when there are rooms and no vacancies, a success is alright when there is a package, success is alright anyway and any curtain is wholesale. A curtain diminishes and an ample space shows varnish. (71)

This paragraph can first be seen as a critique on the “wholesale” of success. The word “wholesale” also has the implication that something has been generated at a lower price, reproduced in greater amounts in order to be accessible to all. The relationship between “curtain”— an object that performs separation and takes away visibility— and “wholesale” may be that an object whose intention is to hide is inherently sells itself short. I will turn now to Woolf’s discussion of curtains:

Perhaps now it would be better to give up seeking for the truth and receiving on one’s head an avalanche of opinion as lava... perhaps it would be better to draw the curtains...

it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man... was capable of song or sonnet. (35)

Conveniently for our analysis, Woolf mentions “it would be better to draw the curtains,” albeit sarcastically. Woolf suggests there is a force within society that makes “seeking for the truth” almost impossible: that, for a woman, speaking the truth would cause “an avalanche of opinion as lava.” Within Stein’s room, she observes that drawing the curtains is obliging to the public. As Woolf gestures to the discontinuation of this tradition and for more of women’s “extraordinary literature,” we can observe similar impulses in Stein’s impulse to occupy her own space in her more than one-hundred lines full, long prose-poem “Rooms.” The room that Stein shows us in this moment, moreover, relies on the approval of society to the extent that it shapes the literature that one writes. The room is directly tied with the economy; a room with “no vacancies” and with “a package” is one that is integrated into the fast-moving pace of industry. The reality that Stein sees is one that is superficial, hidden behind wholesale curtains. With the fleeting nature of success, eventually, an “ample space” will empty and show its contents disguised in “varnish.” Here, that Stein is pleading for stylistic rawness in literature and in words, hidden under varnish— perhaps the *truth* under vanish. Yet, the truth under varnish need not be negative; in another sense of the word, the room is polished, prepared, and preserved. Even with this connotation of the word, Stein gestures to the possibility of another layer of words when she points to only the “varnish” being shown, rather than the objects that lay underneath.

We can additionally note the tonal similarity between Woolf’s speech and Stein’s poem. By making statements such as “success is alright,” Stein builds “conversational tones and rhythms” (Dyodo 4) into her writing. Woolf’s direct sarcasm in remarking that every other man “was capable of a song or sonnet” (35), reveals that there is power and intentionality in the *style*

of both authors. The conversational finds its place in women's writing to disclose a social truth—a truth that need to be talked about, undisguised in varnish.

Also in the room of "Rooms," we are invited to imagine "cases" and "books," or a reliance on particular kinds of literature within society:

The cases are made and books, back books are used to secure tears and church. They are even used to exchange black slippers. They can not be mended with wax. They show no need of any such occasion. (77)

More particularly, the books in the "back"—the antiquated and early texts of history—that are used to secure "tears" and "church." Here a change of convention is not merely the stylistic choice to announce a generation. Where religion, for example, is the cause of a wave of anti-Semitism in Gertrude Stein's France, convention becomes the cause of pain. The institutions that we worship with candles, with "wax," and with our faith, is fully our choice. The books themselves "show no need of any occasion." Convention shows no demand for our following or belief. The word "back" suggests a foundational reliance upon particular texts, even if they may cause harm to present realities.

CLOSED ROOMS

Drawing upon the hints of sarcasm within Stein and Woolf's texts, it is important to see sarcasm within Stein's statements throughout "Rooms." Reading these statements as sarcasm and with irony is vital to understanding the text as a whole. It is important to track these tonal changes as the text slowly transitions into a didactic, empowering monologue; but, before it reaches this point, it seems to make gestures similar to Woolf's: "it would be better to draw the curtains" (35). Let us see, for example, how Stein presents to evocative statements to her readers:

And why complain of more, why complain of very much more. Why complain at all when it is all arranged that as there is no more opportunity and no more appeal and not even any more clinching that certainly now some time has come. (76)

“Why complain of more,” why complain of very much more,” “why complain at all”— the poem’s voice is a coercive one; its extreme resignation reeks of sarcasm and irony. Yet here we ask: what are we complaining about in *Tender Buttons*, with Stein as our comrade? Stein draws our attention to “it is all arranged”; again, pointing out systems that we find ourselves abiding by in our everyday lives. Some force in Stein’s life presents “no more opportunity,” “appeal,” or “clinching”— a conclusion has been drawn and the conversation has ended. On the one hand, “Rooms” is a general, revolutionary cry for any readers that are intrigued by defiance; she does not exactly categorize what kind of defiance. The closed room can, in fact, be a gendered one, but may also be a linguistic one, an economic one, or a political one. But words, even in their generality, can somehow shape the mold that we grant them. It reflects the reality at hand, and strives to shape the movement of the current reality. “The time has come” to resist closed rooms.

RESISTANCE

The next wave of paragraphs in “Rooms” is not a critique, but rather a great call to resistance. Here we find, for the first time in the collection, a pointing to its theme: “determined not only by the linguistic forms... words, morphological and syntactical structures, sound, and intonation... but also by the extraverbal factors of the situation” (Voloshinov 100). Stein’s emotive language in this section is striking as she asserts “thunder” can cause a “change in organization” and directly asks the question: “why is there so much useless suffering”:

Why is there more craving than there is in a mountain. This does not seem strange to one, it does not seem strange to an echo and more surely is in there not being a habit. Why is there so much useless suffering. Why is there. (76)

Sound, like an “echo,” becomes the function of the execution of an idea, one that repeats itself like a “habit.” But this habit must be broken. Stein observes that, within her reality, there is more “craving”— both powerful desire and a desire for power in itself. This makes transparent one of Stein’s agenda in “Rooms”: to explore the causes of political suffering within language and ask— language, us, those in power— *why*. There is a deeper tie between sound and the way it is utilized by the ordering of words and ideas, and even furthermore the conventions of “bread and butter,” “cake and sober,” and domestic obedience. We are told to, instead, “dance a clean dream”:

Dance a clean dream and an extravagant turn up, secure the steady rights and translate more than translate the authority, show the choice and make no more mistakes than yesterday. (76)

Four imperatives command readers to “dance a clean dream,” “secure the steady rights,” “translate more than translate the authority,” “show choice,” and “make no more mistakes.” Conversation is interrupted, and we merely feel the desperation in Stein’s language to change the “extraverbal” reality that exists outside of her words. Her changes in language— which are, at first glance, formal changes— are rooted in real political struggle. She does not only change language as far as rhetoric, she changes its structure because so often in reality that is what it takes to gain freedom. So we return to our connection with Voloshinov’s theory: If words are said in specific historical contexts and are always dialogical even in the absence of an addressee, then: who is Gertrude Stein talking to in *Tender Buttons*? Perhaps, those who recognize that an

experimental work automatically situates itself as a statement against another *style* of living. It grants the link between language and life. To return to Woolf, Stein reminds readers that even an arrangement of words is the “work of suffering human beings” (Woolf 35) and that language is its own room, directly tied to “health and money and the houses we live in” (Woolf 35). Any analysis of what it means to have a room is an effort to recognize the link between life and materiality, life and aesthetic. Any work of language written by a woman is a historically defiant one.

ACT SO THAT THERE IS NO USE IN A CENTRE: Conclusion

We return to the beginning of Stein's "Rooms": "Act so that there is no use in a centre" (63). It is a call to action, a plea to isolated individuality—a utopian vision. Still, 1914 seeps through to the individual work, transforming the desire for individuality into a response to a restricting social reality, with women in rooms and in search for rooms. In a previous chapter, we discussed Stein's de-centered language: that one might seek for a "full presence" after regarding language for more than its capabilities of structure—for more than its immediacy, unity, or servitude to logic. Stein's re-situation of language challenges the use of binaries and seeks for expression that can stand on its own, that might delight in its dispersion of meaning, its own sensory qualities, or its capacity to confront itself through itself. Below the surface of language lay a discernable entropy, a life shifting the identity of a single word, causing repetition to be a highly destabilizing act. The pathway of Stein's language avoids discrimination between "a word's usual and occasional meanings, between its central and lateral meanings, between its detonation and connotation," a completely "fallacious" (Voloshinov 102) mode of language that assumes that one needs to ascribe greater value to the central.

We see that the central—in another sense—is a feeling and receptive body, moving to the sensory aspects of language, imagining the proto-verbal manifest in one's words. It is interrupting the chrononormative way we breathe and process words in language, drawing in a larger breath, and letting physic energy deposit itself into the sentence; it is fully claiming the choice of how one says, when one says, and what one says.

As her political agenda becomes more and more transparent toward the end, it can be assumed that Stein's interest is not to reject meaning, but to revise the hegemonic relations within language that oppress those who use language. In the words of Stein, "composition is the

difference.” By regarding composition as an *active* force that we can apply to language, we can no longer simply yield to the structures of language and the power that it has over shaping the conditions of life. Instead, we will dance our own clean dream.

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