'After all one must know more than one sees and one does not see a cube in its entirety': Gertrude Stein and *Picasso* and Cubism

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> THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.
> Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.
> A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.
>
> – Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*[1]

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> – Gertrude Stein as cited by Marjorie Perloff in *Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage*[2]

The title of the above 'object' from *Tender Buttons*, as cited by Marjorie Perloff, with the second 'THIS' replaced by 'THE', is not how it appears in the 1914 Claire Marie edition of the book. Strangely, this is the edition Perloff lists as her source, although as it is reprinted in *The Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. But there, too, the title is 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER'. There is no full stop after the title in the *Selected Writings* version, as there is no full stop in Perloff's example. But the title is justified on the left margin in both the Claire Marie and *Selected Writings* texts. The only version in which the title is centred, where the second 'THIS' has been printed as 'THE' and where there is no full stop after the title is in *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures, 1909–1945*, but in this printing, as in all others, there is no additional comma between 'muncher' and 'munchers'. The multiple errors that have afflicted the text of *Tender Buttons* during its publication history are disturbing but not surprising. The book offers no standardised

syntax or coherent referentiality to guide the reader; it is a text that demands that the reader see what s/he is looking at.[3]

In 1938, Gertrude Stein published *Picasso*, a book which is part biography and part criticism of Pablo Picasso's work and time. In it Stein claims 'I was alone at [the] time in understanding him, perhaps because I was expressing the same thing in literature'.[4] The comparison between Stein's work in the period around *Tender Buttons*, the period of her literary portraiture, and the cubist movement in painting that Picasso helped create has been a popular one in the history of her work's critical reception. Stephen Scobie offers an explanation as to why:

> [One] can take an art historical term such as Cubism, which has a (more or less) clearly defined meaning in painting, and attempt to apply it to literature – saying, for instance, that Gertrude Stein is 'a Cubist writer'. Such comparisons are most useful, I would argue, when they attempt to define or illuminate those aspects of a work in which it is coming up against the limits of its medium, when there is a perceived need to supplement one discourse with the vocabulary of another. The analogy to painting may be most productive at the point where a literary text strains against the limits of the verbal – when it appears, indeed, to court the annihilation of the verbal in the silence, or muteness, of painting. Stein's writing is felt to be 'like' painting precisely at the points where it seems to be on the edge of denying its own adequacy as words.[5]

Stein herself, in her writing about her writing, often makes use of visual analogies, but my aim in this article is not to compare passages of *Tender Buttons* to cubist paintings, or to argue the success or the validity of such a comparison; rather, it is to locate Stein's literary portraiture inside her own ideas about cubism and literary portraiture. The linking of her literary work to the visual style of cubism often breaks down, I think, when critics do not consider what she means when she uses the term, when they try to use her work as a bridge between the media of linguistic and visual representation. If we are to take her at her word that she was expressing the same thing in writing that Picasso was in painting, it is necessary to examine what it was, exactly, that she believed Picasso was expressing. For this reason, I am not interested in the possible distinctions between analytic and synthetic cubism inside her writing, nor in the way her work is painterly. When it comes to cubism, the best definition for approaching Stein's work comes not from art history, but from Stein

herself. Her comparison of her work to Picasso's relies not so much on form as it does on effect, and it offers a method for reading both her critical and creative work and the work of her critics.

My reading of pieces from *Tender Buttons* comes up against another discursive tradition, that of the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Terms like 'polyphony', 'polysemy', and 'hybridised polyglot writing', which are located at the core of Bakhtin's theories, all apply to Stein's writing, but in different ways. Readers attempting to perform a Bakhtinian reading of Stein's work would experience frustrations similar to those who would try to force upon her the metaphor of cubist painting. Stein's language in *Tender Buttons* performs a break from repressive monologia and subverts a unified worldview, just as Bakhtin believes the novel does. But, to borrow terms from Lyn Hejinian, Stein's experiments with grammar and syntax function laterally within language, while Bakhtin's study of the cultural languages of narrative style or form is etymological.[6] Whereas Bakhtin's polyphony is concerned with the many voices heard through the novel, Stein's polyphony, located within multiple pronunciations both in and across languages, is closer to the musical definition of the term; it has more to do with sensory experience than historical or ideological understanding. Bakhtin's hybridised polyglot writing is a search for diachronic meaning: how certain genres or forms carry within them a literary tradition implicating culture and history. Stein's hybridised polyglot writing flattens out the hierarchy of history; it brings to the surface the play between languages, and is dependent on simultaneity. Wendy Steiner locates similar notions of ahistoricity and simultaneity at the base of cubism itself, and describes Stein's project well when she points out that cubism forces us

> to think of history in a new way, not as a plotted narrative moving toward a resolution, but as a cubist painting whose elements maintain their heterogeneity – objects, people; things, signs; the banal, the dramatic; the contemporaneous, the anachronous – in an aestheticized structure of relations.[7]

In her essay 'Poetry as Word System: The Art of Gertrude Stein', Marjorie Perloff writes:

> Cubist painting is ... characterized by a peculiar tension between conventional symbols (letters, musical notes, numbers, ...) and stylized images of reality. ... It is impossible to 'read' such a painting as a coherent

> image of reality. Whatever interpretation we advance is put into question by the appearance of contradictory clues. The ambiguity of the image is thus impossible to resolve.[8]

This is a valuable insight, but unfortunately Perloff neglects to employ it in her discussion of a piece in *Tender Buttons*, where I think it could be most useful, and her analysis suffers because of it. She limits her analysis of 'THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER' to its sexuality, ignoring its ambiguity and play: 'Here "Aider" is a pun on "Ada", (Gertrude's pet name for Alice), and the allusions are to the sex act and orgasm'.[9] I use what I consider to be Perloff's (mis)reading (and misprinting) here not only because I think it shows the consequences of a thematic approach, but also because I consider the piece she deals with to be one of the most active pieces in *Tender Buttons*. I will use the piece as a conduit for my analysis because I do not have enough space to deal fairly with all the pieces. My argument will benefit from a close reading of it, a reading that may seem exhausting but is far from exhaustive.

> THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.
> Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.
> A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let. (Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 29)

There is a visual rhyme in the first three words of the title, though the voiced sibilant of 'IS' contrasts with the devoiced sibilants coming at the end of each 'THIS' and of 'DRESS'. 'AIDER' is a strange word, and I say strange because I do not know how to pronounce it. The fact that it contains no sibilant and is separated from the rest of the title by a comma emphasises its strangeness. It is an English word, a noun meaning 'one who aids'; and it is a French word, the infinitive form of the verb meaning 'to aid, help, or assist'. It also seems like it could be a German word, pronounced 'eye-der'; or, as Perloff writes, 'it [could be] a pun on Ada (Gertrude's pet name for Alice)'; or it could be a phonetic description of the British pronunciation of 'idea', with an intrusive 'r': e.g. 'I've got an ideer'. There is a polyphony in 'AIDER', and it is deafening. I can no longer read 'AIDER'; I can write it, because in my mind I recite 'A-I-D-E-R' as I type or print. When I encounter it on the page, however, it cannot just be the English noun or the French verb, nor the pun on 'Ada' or 'idea', but simply, silently, the image of a chain of letters, 'AIDER'. The multiple

possible pronunciations resist vocalisation in a manner similar to the way a cubist canvas resists organised viewing by exploiting intersecting planes and simultaneous perspectives, and eliminating the vanishing point. But while it is true that the silence of 'aider' and 'whow' 'strains against the limits of the verbal', and fits into Scobie's criteria for a supplementary visual lexicon, that silence is better approached through Stein's own explanation of her project in *Tender Buttons*. She claims it was her 'first conscious struggle with the problem of correlating sight, sound, and sense, and eliminating rhythm'.[10] 'Sense' in this quotation applies not only to the cognitive function of reading, but to physical sense as well, as the sight and sounds of words separate, and the lack of rhythm disrupts the habitual forward eye movement and interiorised vocalisation of reading prose.

Bob Perelman, in his book *The Trouble With Genius*, relates the anecdote: '[Guy Davenport] once asked [Louis] Zukofsky what the "mg. Dancer" is who dances in "A"-21, a milligram sprite, a magnesium elf, a margin dancer, or Aurora, as the dictionary allows for all these meanings. "All", he replied".[11] There is a polysemy attached to the polyphony of 'AIDER'. I can imagine a scenario in which 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.' poses a question[12] about translation. The second 'THIS' repeats the deixis of the first, and 'AIDER' becomes a mistranslated apposite for 'DRESS', which acts as an English noun denoting the word which is the verb 'to dress'.[13] The 'Aider, why aider' of the first line thus functions as a questioning of the link between signifier and signified, as well as a sign of the Babelian frustration over how different words mean the same things in different languages.

The repetition of 'whow'[14] in the piece strengthens the language-lesson reading. The word is actually three words: 'who', 'how' and 'wow', and depends on a simultaneity which implies a misrecognition, a slippage between the signifiers and signifieds that occurs when readers are unfamiliar with a language. 'whow' can also be read as a phonetic representation of a mispronunciation common to learners of the English language. In the word 'who' there is a 'w', which inexperienced readers know is pronounced as the velar glide, but, because they have heard the word pronounced with an initial 'h' sound, they move the 'w' to the end of the word when reading. Or, the terminal 'w' may also be a transcription of the way the high back tense vowel in 'who' finishes in the velar glide. The initial 'w' is silent in speech, but present in writing; the terminal 'w' is vocalised in speech,

but absent in writing. The conflation of the visual and the aural in Stein's language results in the play between image and sound, in the same way that polyphony and polysemy perform within each other.

Peter Quartermain locates Stein within an era and geography in which the English language in the U.S.A. experienced an enormous change. Taking information from the thirteenth census (1910) of the United States, Quartermain estimates that 'roughly one person in four in the continental United States in 1910 learned English as an additional language, or did not know it at all'. He further points out that Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky are all poets who were 'native born of non-English foreign-stock', and that Stein lived in Vienna from when she was eight months old until she was four-and-a-half, when her family moved to Paris for six months.[15] On top of this, Susan Holbrook points out, the young Gertrude Stein had Hungarian and German governesses and a Czech tutor.[16] When she wrote *Tender Buttons* Stein was living in Paris, which was a centre for both European and American artists. Although the French language was not experiencing the same linguistic evolution as American English, Stein was still surrounded, in her salon, in her community, by various languages. I think it is appropriate, therefore, to read in areas of *Tender Buttons* the possibility of hybridised polyglot writing. The line segment 'muncher, muncher munchers', like 'aider', can move in between the English, French and German languages, the English noun becoming a French infinitive verb, and the 's' at the end of 'munchers' simultaneously becoming a gesture towards both conjugation and plurality.

The play between languages is also present in Stein's ROAST POTATOES.

> Roast potatoes for. (Stein, *Tender*, 51)

The preposition 'for' functions here as a transformer of 'ROAST' from adjective to verb, though both the imperative and declarative readings are fragmentary. A homonym for the number four, 'for' also suggests a check list: 'Roast potatoes: four'. But most interestingly, I think, is the way in which 'for' stretches across languages to signify the French word for 'oven' (*four*), lending an associational meaning to the line.[17]

'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.' also suggests, phonetically, 'This is distress, aider', which allows 'AIDER' to be both the English noun, the helper, as an addressee, as well as the French verb as the

imperative (*m'aider!*). The visual rhyme of the repeated 'IS' in the first three words contributes to the distress reading, as it can represent a vocalised stutter, or visual shudder. The rest of the piece can then be read as telegramic, with 'stop' representing a vocalised full stop, referring back to the full stop at the end of the title. At the same time, 'stop' functions as a command: 'stop the muncher'; 'muncher' acts as a noun as well as an action towards someone (munch-her), and alters 'AIDER' to 'aid-her' and, in a mirrored reversal, 'kill her' becomes 'killer'. The repeated 'whow' becomes both an error in transmission as well as a representation of breathless confusion, of at the same time questions and gasps.

It is the same breathless confusion and suggestion of violence that leads Marjorie Perloff to her analysis of the piece, which I think is certainly valid but inadequate in its finitude, as an allusion 'to the sex act and orgasm'. 'DRESS' becomes the feminine garment; 'AIDER' becomes Alice; 'stop', 'touch', 'whow', 'muncher' and 'kill her'[18] all become gendered and eroticised; and Alice becomes one who helps, one who munches, and one who kills.

Stein outlines three reasons for cubism in a brief passage early in *Picasso* but, as is her style, does not deal with them systematically. I, however, will attempt to treat them in a rigorous, definitive manner. By approaching them one by one and positioning them against other critical texts, both by herself and others, I will demonstrate how they are relevant to an understanding of her poetics around the time of *Tender Buttons*.

> First. The composition, because the way of living had changed the composition of living had extended and each thing was as important as any other thing. (Stein, *Picasso*, 12)

In his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' Walter Benjamin recognises an earlier shift in the 'composition of living' and the influence it had on art:

> The daily sight of a lively crowd may once have constituted a spectacle to which one's eyes had to adapt first. On the basis of this supposition, one may assume that once the eyes had mastered this task they welcomed opportunities to test their newly acquired faculties. This would mean that the technique of Impressionist painting, whereby the picture is garnered in a riot of dabs of color, would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar.[19]

Impressionism eventually gave way to Cubism as the primary visual representation of life at the turn of the twentieth century. The shift mimics the work of Paul Cézanne, whose early paintings began to depart from the Impressionist style, and whose later works are widely considered proto-Cubist. His paintings were a major influence on Stein, as she makes explicit in an 1946 interview:

> Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition. Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but which was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing.[20]

Emphasising Stein's insistence that in composition, 'each thing was as important as any other thing', Lyn Hejinian points to Cézanne's landscape paintings, which 'are presented, so to speak, broadside, and more than one area is present with full force. Similarly, Stein distributes value or meaning across the widest possible range of articulation – in this context, one might say, panoramically'.[21] The flattening of perspective in the visual field of Cézanne's work is the result of the breakdown of the visual hierarchy that shaped the composition of painting since the Renaissance; the same widening of focus is present in Stein's work as a result of the absence of the syntactic and logical hierarchy that had dominated prose writing.

Hejinian points to developments in psychology as contributing to the composition of twentieth-century life. The writings of William James, who was one of Stein's professors at Radcliffe College from 1893 to 1897, provide Hejinian with an example. She quotes from his work *Principles of Psychology I*:

> If anyone ask what is the mind's object when you say 'Columbus discovered America in 1492', most people will reply 'Columbus' or 'America'. They will name a substantive kernel or nucleus of the consciousness, and say the thought is 'about' that. ... But the *Object* of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel not particularly included in its content, and to call that its object. ... The object of my thought in the previous sentence, for example, is strictly speaking neither Columbus nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence, 'Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492'. And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words.[22]

The gesture of hyphenation represents a frustration with the 'primacy of the noun,' a primacy which, according to Stein, it was *Tender Buttons*' intention to disarm.[23] She does not avoid nouns in *Tender Buttons*, but subverts a syntactical hierarchy which would allow people to pick 'substantive kernels' like 'Columbus' or 'America' out of a sentence. She achieves the destabilisation of nouns in part through her parody of the dictionary format, where all words are treated as objects, as nouns, to be defined (or portrayed) by the words following them. In 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.', for example, the constant shifting involved in the play between polyphony and polysemy, which results in a pointing both forward from the title and backward from the rest of the piece, prevents the extraction of any central, identifiable *object*, or 'substantive kernel'.

James's theory of hyphenation relates to Stein's retroactive paralleling of her work in portraiture just before and after the writing of *Tender Buttons* to the then young, quintessentially twentieth-century medium of film, which provides a different notion of totality: 'I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing'.[24] Whether or not she achieved her goal is debatable; it is likely that Stein felt that, like Picasso's cubism, she was alone at the time in understanding film. But the analogy provides insight into her style of composition, and her fascination with how twenty-four frames per second can combine into a whole.

Stein cites another technological innovation developed around the time that Picasso was painting and she was writing that offers an example of how 'the way of living had changed the composition of living', one which parallels the effect of the appearance of the nineteenth-century crowd: the aeroplane. Near the end of *Picasso*, Stein writes:

> One must not forget that the earth seen from an airplane is more splendid than the earth seen from an automobile. The automobile is the end of progress on the earth, it goes quicker but essentially the landscapes seen from an automobile are the same as the landscapes seen from a carriage, a train, a waggon, or in walking. But the earth seen from an airplane is something else. ... When I was in America I for the first time traveled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism. ... (Stein, *Picasso*, 50)

The view from an aeroplane does away with the earth-bound rules of traditional visual representation, destroying the hierarchy of foreground, middle ground and background. Such a hierarchy depends on a progress inside of the image, a progress that has its roots in the carriage, the train, the car, etc. If the movement takes place on the surface, and only the surface, then all things become equal. The aeroplane, like Cézanne, exchanges depth for breadth.

Stein's attempt to destabilise and de-centre traditional biases towards progress and perspective is rooted in her distrust of the scientific method, which demands a certain kind of observation. Stein's celebration of uncertainty provides the basis for her second reason for cubism:

> Secondly, the faith in what the eyes were seeing, that is to say the belief in the reality of science, commenced to diminish. To be sure science had discovered many things, she [sic] would continue to discover things, but the principle which was the basis of all this was completely understood, the joy of discovery was almost over. (Stein, *Picasso*, 12)

Relating this reason to Picasso's work, Stein writes:

> Really most of the time one sees only a feature of a person with whom one is, the other features are covered by a hat, by the light, by clothes for sport and everybody is accustomed to complete the whole entirely from their knowledge, but Picasso when he saw an eye, the other one did not exist for him and only the one he saw did exist for him and as a painter, and particularly a Spanish painter, he was right, one sees what one sees, the rest is a reconstruction from memory and painters have nothing to do with reconstruction, nothing to do with memory, they concern themselves only with visible things and so the cubism of Picasso was an effort to make a picture of these visible things and the result was disconcerting for him and for the others, but what else could he do, a creator can only do one thing, he can only continue, that is all he can do. (Stein, *Picasso*, 15)

Such reconstruction, from memory, is a process Stein wished to avoid in her writing around the time of *Tender Buttons*, as comparison between the above passage and the following one, from 'Portraits and Repetitions', makes clear:

> I began to wonder at at about [the] time [of *Tender Buttons*] just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. ... [And] I was creating in my writing by simply looking. ... I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever

> I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description. ... And the thing that excited me so very much at that time and still does is that the words or words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing. (Stein, 'Portraits...', 114–15)

Stein's frustration over the inadequacy of language's power to describe can be located in, according to Stephen Meyer, her rejection of the scientific approach to writing, and her subsequent adoption of a 'nonmechanistic *outlook*' that resulted in *Tender Buttons* [my italics].[25] In 'The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans', Stein writes that during her studies with James, she 'completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with the complete description of everything.'[26] The suspicion about 'the reality of science' that Stein argues prompted the cubist movement in painting appears in Stein's effort to avoid 'description' in her writing. Referring to the above quotation from 'The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans', Meyer writes:

> To the practical question of the extent of such 'complete[ness]' – 'if this can really be done the complete description of everything then what else is there to do' – [Stein] responded that one might try to stop 'continuing describing everything'. This seeming tautology is easier said than done. When some lines later Stein rewrote her question in the form of the more brutal and rhetorical, 'if it can be done why do it', she was offering a motive both for discontinuing the 'scientific' project of *The Making of Americans* – which she now felt sure could be accomplished – and for beginning the new project of 'stop[ping] describing everything', about which she was not certain at all.[27]

Stein felt that science, both in her technique of writing and in general, had become too dependent on accumulative knowledge. Accumulative knowledge is dependent on an idea of progression, and Stein believed, as she claims Picasso understood, 'that a thing without progress is more splendid than a thing which progresses' (Stein, *Picasso* 49). The elements in 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.' point forward and backwards, as well as up and down, on the page, but never progress to a developed end. Different readings are both frustrated and encouraged by shifting relationships between the words

and their possible meanings. What is being described, after all, in 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.'? It is positioned in the 'OBJECTS' section of the book, but unlike pieces such as 'A CLOTH', 'A CHAIR' or 'A PIANO', it will not allow the reader an image to be disrupted. Though 'DRESS' is included in the title, it does not contain the potency that it would on its own, its signifying power dispersed amongst 'THIS IS THIS' and 'AIDER' before the body of the portrait even begins.

Another phenomenon Stein attempts to subvert in *Tender Buttons*, Meyer argues, is the effect of association:

> [Stein] objected to association, whether lexical or syntactical, on two counts. First, it distracted from the writing by removing one's attention from the object on the page and breaking one's concentration. Second, and still more damning, it was entirely habitual. One had no control of one's associations – it was hardly possible to stop them – and as such they were a sign of one's dependence on habit.[28]

The idea of keeping the reader's focus on the page is a reclaiming of language: a de-learning to motivate a re-learning. For this reason, Perloff's use of 'THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER', when her source prints it as 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.', and her addition of a comma to the piece, exposes a reading shaped, in part, by a removal of attention, by habit. As Michael Davidson puts it,

> The question is not 'what' [Stein] means but 'how'. If [the reading her work demands] is difficult it is only because our habits of reading have been based on a passive acceptance of the criterion of adequacy; Stein undermines the model with the simplest of language only so that we may read for the first time – again.[29]

Peter Quartermain invokes the language poet Bruce Andrews, whose writing, like so many of the language poets, is heavily influenced by Stein,[30] in order to explain how texts like *Tender Buttons* replace the system of reference that is memory with a disruption of the activity of reading:

> 'Memory', Bruce Andrews observes, 'gives us a system of reference. And opacity gives us a system of amnesia, or a reminder of the mnemonic challenge.' And the challenge? To make 'sense' – an act of great attentiveness, insisting as it does on the particular, the concrete, the present; resisting as it does abstraction and theory.[31]

Stein's writing attempts to perform a sort of phlebotomy, an incision into the linear flow of science, of memory, of language, of perception, in order to remind the reader of the inadequacy of habit and progress.

Stein's third reason for the development of cubism is that

> the framing of life, the need that a picture exist in its frame, remain in its frame was over. A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that always had existed and now pictures commenced to want to leave their frames and this also created the necessity for cubism. (Stein, *Picasso*, 15)

The 'frame' here can point to Andrews's 'frame of reference', and can also be interpreted as a comment on the breakdown of the Renaissance perspective, which functioned as a grammar of visual representation; but I think it is better applied to an idea of movement. In her essay 'Literary Cubism: The Limits of the Analogy', Wendy Steiner writes:

> Spatial ambiguity allowed the cubists to escape the self-enclosed moment, because the various aspects of the object simultaneously present implied the passing of perceptual time. In effect, both Stein and the cubists reversed the treatment of temporality in their arts. Where the subject of a painting normally appears in an arrested moment of time, in cubist art the subject is definitely a temporal object. And whereas literature normally develops its subjects gradually from one sentence to the next, supplying new information as it proceeds, Stein's subjects were to be totally present, fully developed, in each atemporal sentence.[32]

I disagree with Steiner's idea that the different perspectives represented in cubism imply 'the passing of perceptual time', for the contribution of cubism to painterly representation is not temporal but spatial. And I also must take issue with her use of the word 'subject' in reference to Stein's work; such use positions her in the very discourse she argues Stein is trying to subvert. Readers must take seriously Stein's deliberate designation of the 'subjects' of the first section of *Tender Buttons* as 'OBJECTS'. Apart from this, however, Steiner's notion of Stein's objects as developing through the rejection of the progression of syntax, theme, or narrative is important. And it is important, as well, to recognize that the lack of such progression does not result in stasis, that movement need not be accumulative. Vibration, oscillation and *differance* are all movements without linear progress.

William Carlos Williams describes movement well, in relation to Stein's work:

> Movement (for which in a petty way logic is taken), the so-called search for truth and beauty, is for us the effect of breakdown of the attention. [Movement] ... must always be considered *aimless, without progress.* ... The whole of writing is an alertness not to let go of a possibility of movement in our fearful bedazzlement with some concrete and fixed present. The goal is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement from breaking down and becoming a hole into which we sink decoratively to rest.[33] [my italics]

It is this same notion of movement that makes the application of the term 'still life' antithetical to the cubist practice. 'Still life', as it refers to cubist painting and Stein's work in *Tender Buttons*,[34] denotes not static objects of representation, but the condition of remaining alive. Still lifes are, for Stein and Picasso and Gris and Braque, still live, their name contradicted by the perceptual movement resulting from their style of representation. The cubists changed the 'still' in 'still life' from adjective to adverb. The paintings and poems become verbs instead of nouns, and the verbs are always modal, never copular. That is, the paintings and poems should, would, could, and might be, but never are. This is the problem with Perloff's treatment of 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.': that it fuses the meaning to the text without considering the play involved. She creates a hole into which her reading sinks decoratively to rest, risking stasis. Juliana Spahr points to Stein's essay 'Poetry and Grammar' for an explanation of how Stein set out specifically to avoid such fusion; it is there that '[Stein] writes that she likes pronouns because they are not fixed: they "represent some one but they are not its or his name. In not being his or its name they already have a greater possibility of being something"'.[35] Stein was the eternal optimist.

The frame that Stein's writing moves beyond is the literary parallel to the Renaissance three-point perspective of mimetic representation in painting; it is grammar, logic, narrative progression, association and habit, and in 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.', it is also spelling. The frame is the book, as well, and the prose form, and the tension that occurs within *Tender Buttons* is a result of the work going beyond the form. Though the pages are numbered, there is no real progress in the book. Apart from the classification of pieces as 'Objects', 'Food' and 'Rooms', segments of the work could be reordered with little effect.

The first 'Object' in *Tender Buttons* does, however, perform as an entrance to the work, insomuch as it seems to offer a method for encountering the rest of the book.

> A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.
> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 9)

The exchange of meaning that takes place in the terms 'CARAFE', 'A BLIND GLASS', 'a kind in glass and a cousin', and 'a spectacle', with their relationships to each other and to ideas about vision – spectacle as in a sight to behold as well as an auxiliary viewing apparatus made of glass – can be detected in the phrase 'an arrangement in a system to pointing'. The organised confusion – 'not unordered in not resembling' – the deliberate destabilisation of the object, of the carafe, is reflected in the sentence 'The difference is spreading', a sentence which Michael Davidson believes,

> not only foreshadows deconstructive thought; it recognizes that between one term (a carafe) and a possible substitute (a blind glass) exists a barrier, not an equal sign, and it is this difference which supports all signification. Stein interrogates this barrier in order to break open the imperial Sign and leave 'a system to pointing', a language that no longer needs to contain the world in order to live in it.[36]

The interrogation of the process of signification is, according to Neil Schmitz, a way to explain the title of the book: 'Words as buttons, fastening side to side, signifier to signified, become tender, pliable, alive in the quick of consciousness'.[37] Here Davidson is useful again, in his treatment of the portrait of 'ROASTBEEF':

> Stein's disjunctive prose removes [the objects] from their commonality and accentuates the gap between object and description. ... Roastbeef exists as the sum of many processes, some of which involve cooking, preparing, eating and digesting; it is the least permanent of things, and yet for the creator of literary still lifes, it is expected to stand in an eternal brown glaze on the verge of being carved.[38]

The frame Stein's writing moves beyond is the authority of the noun, and its promise of containment. Her antagonism towards the noun was the driving force behind the style of *The Making of Americans*, where to avoid the noun's supposed stasis Stein employed 'the method of living in adverbs in verbs in pronouns, in adverbial clauses written or implied and

in conjunctions'.[39] After removing the noun from her prose, Stein moved on to poetry in *Tender Buttons*, where her parody of the dictionary format accentuates the noun's inadequacy. Stein argues that

> A noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it. A name is adequate or it is not. If it is adequate then why go on calling it, if it is not then calling it by its name does no good. ... That is the reason that slang exists it is to change the nouns which have been names for so long. ... Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive. (Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', 136, 128)

This is what cubism was for Stein: a movement in language.

The ideology of the noun is often responsible for critics' misreadings of Stein's work.[40] In our modern lexicon 'cubism' is so linked to painting that many approaches to Stein's cubism are blind in their expectation of visual parallels. In Perloff's case, the ideology of the noun was behind her assumption that the 'THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER' she most likely experienced on the page of *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1909–1945* was the same as the one she saw on the page of *The Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, and that that 'OBJECT' was faithfully reprinted from the original 1914, Claire Marie edition of *Tender Buttons*. The ideology of the noun also appears responsible for the mutated title of 'THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.' 'THIS IS THE DRESS' is closer to a nominative, declarative clause than 'THIS IS THIS DRESS', which through its pronoun repetition and vague reference causes problems for the reader even before 'AIDER'. The combination of the definite article and the noun resolves the ambiguity of 'THIS' in a completed moment of ostention. In the title's original form the deixis of the second 'THIS' turns back toward the first to create a swirl of reference; the predicate object retains the tension created by the initial 'THIS', e.g. 'What does this "THIS" refer to?' The replacement of the second 'THIS' with 'THE' defuses that tension; it becomes quite clear that the initial 'THIS' refers to the 'THE DRESS'. Syntactically as well it is the ideology of the noun which suggests there should be a comma between 'muncher' and 'munchers,' as any list repeating the same (or similar) word three times should.

Just as her creative work attempts to subvert the authority of the noun, Stein's critical writings disobey a grammar of behaviour. Through her disdain for traditional grammar and her use of eccentric

examples she performs a praxis which scares off many critical readers. But her play is serious, both in her critical and creative work, and demands an engagement different from that of traditional criticism. Those who discard her self-analyses rob themselves of some of the most innovative and intelligent commentaries ever to be produced on her work.

Notes

1. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (New York: Claire Marie, May 1914), 29.

2. Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein', *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 107.

3. The text I cite in this paper is the Claire Marie edition, printed in May 1914. There is a Sun & Moon version from 1990, which is 'photographed from the pages of [the] first edition', and is faithful to the Claire Marie version down to the pagination and publisher's advertisements on the back page (Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* [Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1990] [back cover]). There is a note on the copyright page acknowledging that the book is 'reprinted in different form in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*'. A 1970 printing of the book by Haskell House Publishers maintains the same loyalty to the first printing that the Sun & Moon text does. These three printings differ from the *Selected Writings* version in that they place full stops after each of the titles of 'Objects' and 'Food'. There is a Dover edition, published in 1997, which claims to be the 'unabridged text of the work first published by Claire Marie, New York, 1914', but which includes the title 'THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER.' (Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* [New York: Dover, 1997] [copyright page]).This version of the title, though without the full stop, appears only in the *Writings and Lectures* version (Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, *Writings and Lectures 1909–1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971], 176).

4. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 16.

5. Stephen Scobie, *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting From Cubism to Concrete Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 104–5.

6. Lyn Hejinian, 'Two Stein Talks', *Temblor* 3 (1986), 132.

7. Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 191.

8. Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System', 72.

9. Ibid., 107.

10. William Carlos Williams, 'The Work of Gertrude Stein', *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1990), 21.

11. Bob Perelman, *The Trouble With Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukovsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 172.

12. The absence of a question mark does not disqualify such a reading; there are no question marks in *Tender Buttons*, but it would be impossible to argue that there are no questions.

13. 'This sounds complicated but it is very simple' (Stein, *Picasso*, 32). When learning a language, both the verbs 'to dress' and 'to help' are included among the most rudimentary lessons.

14. 'whow' I find as polyphonic as 'aider'; I can only read it as 'w-h-o-w' as well.

15. Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukovsky to Susan Howe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10.

16. Susan Holbrook, 'Lifting Bellies, Filling Petunias, and Making Meanings Through the Trans-Poetic,' *American Literature* 71.4 (1999), 754.

17. Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, 23.

18. The violence becomes eroticized when one considers that 'orgasm' translates into French as 'le petit mort'.

19. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Beaudelaire', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 197.

20. Stein, quoted in Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System', 91.

21. Hejinian, 'Two Stein Talks', 136.

22. William James, quoted in ibid., 130.

23. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1962), 460.

24. Gertrude Stein, 'Portraits and Repetitions', in *Gertrude Stein: Writing and Lectures 1909–45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 106.

25. Stephen Meyer, 'Writing Psychology Over: Gertrude Stein and William James', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 8 (1995), 133.

26. Gertrude Stein, 'The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans', *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1962), 256.

27. Meyer, 'Writing Psychology Over', 134.

28. Ibid., 152.

29. Michael Davidson, 'On Reading Stein', *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 198.

30. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, of which Andrews is co-editor, there is an entire section devoted to various poets' investigations of pieces from *Tender Buttons*.

31. Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, 15.

32. Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 145.

33. William Carlos Williams, 'The Work of Gertrude Stein', *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1990), 21.

34. Continuing the link between *Tender Buttons* and cubism, the Sun & Moon edition has on its front cover a reproduction of a painting from 1914 by Stein's friend and contemporary, Juan Gris, entitled *Still Life*.

35. Juliana Spahr, ' "There Is No Way of Speaking English": The Polylingual Grammars of Gertrude Stein', *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2001), 25.

36. Davidson, 'On Reading Stein', 197.

37. Neil Schmitz, quoted in Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System', 101.

38. Davidson, 'On Reading Stein', 197–8.

39. Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1909–1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 136.

40. The ideology of the noun parallels the ideologies of the epic and tragic forms identified in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (see page 68), which result in a repressive monologia and unified worldview.