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Stein’s Modernist Dissent on Narrativity

To understand the events of a novel appears the immediate ambition when reading prose, but what is one to do when there are no events, and what is one to do when what description exists denies straightforward understanding entirely? Stein’s writing can be understood in many ways, no one being more acutely correct than another, and while some may write it off as nonsense entirely, the novel plays with language and expectations in a way more profound than many would imagine.

Typical readings of Gertrude Stein’s abstruse “Tender Buttons” look through the lens of experimentation. The writing is seen as disruptive, antithetical to the idea of narrativity. Often people will draw parallels between the novel and the cubist art movement, examining how the perspectives collide in distorted and revealing ways. These analyses see the similarities as helpful tools to glean meaning from Stein’s novel, but tend to omit the way cubism, while having depth and dimensionality, shatters the viewer’s tendencies towards realism. It is not mere experimentation for its own sake, it is a specific dissent upon the crystal clear, looking to challenge an audience’s relationship with meaning through laying bare the complexities of the art’s form.

While experimentation certainly was significant to the novel’s creation, its essence must be understood within the context of the history of the novel. As Moretti explains, the tension between narrativity and complexity was polarized through our desire to know and to understand, giving way for narrative dominance. (Moretti) We want our novels to connect as clearly as the world around us, and time to move forward with momentum as it does day to day. But because of this tendency, much was lost in the way of complexity. Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons not only denies the forward moving nature of prose, but critiques the reader’s affinity for narrativity, attempting to steer the course of the novel towards complexity through abstraction.

The novel specifically uses language in a way that directly avoids narrativity. The choice to use and to avoid certain verbs shows exactly how Stein eludes forward momentum. Variations on the verb “to be” are consistent throughout the book, and when other verbs are used, they are often verbs that describe things rather than show action. In “A CLOTH.” Gertrude Stein writes, “Enough cloth is plenty and more, more is almost enough for that and besides if there is no more spreading is there plenty of room for it.” (Stein 10) The passage uses description exclusively, avoiding any action entirely. Even beyond the words “is”, “was”, “are”, and “were” the verbs remain descriptive of the way something is, rather than action occurring. In “MORE.” the author writes “The reason that there is more snips are the same shining very colored rid of no round color.” (Stein 10) Stein uses the verbs “shining” and “colored”, but neither of them depict action occurring in any narrative way, but simply describe the way that the object is. This occurs throughout the novel, in many other passages as well. Beyond the use of verbs only for description, Stein will also abandon verbs entirely for many parts of the novel. There are many sentences that simply describe something without use of any verb at all. Looking again at the passage “MORE.” from *Objects* Stein writes, “An elegant use of foliage and grace and a little piece of white cloth and oil.” (Stein 10) This is one of the many sentences in the novel where Stein only describes things, without any verbs at all.

This use of language makes us read the novel as we would a description in any narrative book, as authors describe the settings in which all of the action will take place, but in “Tender Buttons” we are left with only the descriptions, reveling in our own desires for something to occur. This forces the reader to grapple subconsciously with their desire for narrativity, and ultimately realize that even without such a thing the writing can still hold merit. By using the verbs only to describe the way things are, instead of what happens, Stein critiques our desire for forward momentum and for clear narrative structure.

Repetition of words, phrases, and titles leads us to draw connections between passages, specifically looking at which the order in which they appear. The Oxford English Dictionary describes narrative as “An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account.” (narrative, n.) In the FOOD chapter the author writes, “What is cut. What is cut by it. What is cut by it in.” (Stein 28) The length of the segments grow, suggesting that the sentence grows as time progresses. Forward progression, a series of phrases with an order and established connections, these are all elements of narrative, yet even still narrativity is denied. Despite the appearance of narrative, it is missing the most crucial aspect, story. In “FOOD.” again, repetition makes narrative appear as though it is present, where the only factor absent is the clear story. Stein writes, “It was a shame it was a shame to stare to stare and double and relieve relieve be cut up show as by the elevation of it and out out more in the steady where the come and on and the all the shed and that.” (Stein 30) This passage reads like a book read with a stutter, as if without the repetition it would be a story and would be narrative. In reality, it is just more of the same, stream of consciousness, abstract, yet complex, where there may be meanings or not.

“Tender Buttons” makes light of our desire not only for narrativity, but our desire for understanding entirely. Stein mimics the extreme examples of logic and intellectualism, mocking their endless streams of subordinate clauses and needless abstruseness. In ROASTBEEF, a pattern emerges: considering the given condition, there is no need for action to be taken. Stein writes, “Considering the circumstances there is no occasion for a reduction, considering that there is no pealing there is no occasion for an obligation, considering that there is no outrage there is no necessity for any reparation, considering that there is no particle sodden there is no occasion for deliberation.” (Stein 18) While the logical structure exists, there is no clear connection between the phrases. The inevitable outcomes are vague ideas such as “reduction”, “obligation”, and “deliberation.” Stein does this in order to expose how, though intellectual writing often appears carefully considered, so often does it lose its meaning through the layers of vague limiting conditions, hindering any practical usefulness. It begins to ask, does true understanding even matter if it becomes so far removed from the reality which it describes? If the answer is no, then a novel so abstract that it denies clear interpretation remains more meaningful to the reader, making analysis of the language somewhat of an introspective endeavor.

Critiquing the flaws of esoteric theories in writing within the context of a novel points the reader to the relationship between the objective truths and their relationship to narrativity. It may be read as a response to the “realist” movement of the nineteenth century. There was a great focus on the accurate, objective, almost scientific representation of the world around us. Realism is described in the Oxford English Dictionary as “suggesting a deliberate rejection of conventionally attractive or appropriate subjects in favour of sincerity and a focus on the unidealized treatment of contemporary life.” (realism, n.) In Stein’s attempts to “bring the inside out” often the effects of her writing and of realism would appear much the same, but her writing brings attention to everything except what is real, and critiques the definitiveness of realism in covert ways. She prefaces her description of coffee with “More of double.” and follows this with saying that “a single image is not splendor.” (Stein 5) This can be read as a judgement on the singular objective realism where in fact seeing through multiple perspectives would be more appropriate. This passage ties the descriptive realism with the intellectualist profundity further when Stein writes, “The sight of a reason, the same sight slighter, the sight of a simpler negative answer.” (Stein 6) Looking at descriptive writing as “the sight” of “reason” makes clear where the parallels between the most pretentious logical writing and the “scientific” approach to narrative are flawed. This “same sight slighter” is not only a narrow perspective, but the word “slight” may be used also as an insult or a form of disrespect, which is corroborated by the sight being a “simpler negative answer.” The observations in realism and the reason of intellectualism, often told by an aristocratic upper class, depicts things realistically in way that is belittling to the subjects in trying to show the unattractive unidealized version, these aspects may be exaggerated creating an ugly caricature of anything other than the intellectual upper-class individual. The passage is filled with references to dirtiness, and its juxtaposition to cleanliness. This alludes to the “deliberate rejection of conventionally attractive” subject matter.

If narrativity grew in popularity due to its ability to be understood, naturally in order to broaden the horizon of understanding realism would be a logical progression, but Stein insists that this approach fails in the same way that simple narrativity did as well, through its lack of differing perspectives. She not only exposes our inert desire for forward progression and for story but criticizes the narrow path that it leads us on, condemning our veracious consumption of story that grows increasingly “real” while failing to accurately and respectfully depict the reality it represents. Is “Tender Buttons” the solution to the failings of narrativity as it stands in the course of the novel? It may or may not be, but certainly an alternative must exist to challenge the uniformity of perspective in writing.

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