

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF GERTRUDE STEIN

(1874-1946)

"[The] desire to gain by artifice a safety from the world--to find a way of thinking without the risks of feeling--is the source of the impulse to abstractness and simplicity in Gertrude Stein as it is in much of modern painting, where she felt immediately the similarity of aim. Protective language names, it never renders. It replaces events with speech. It says two people are in love, it does not show them loving. Jeff and Melanctha talk their passion.

Protective speech must cut off meanings, not take them on. It must find contexts that will limit the functions of its words to that of naming. Gertrude Stein set about discovering such contexts. Dull, flat, repetitious, thin, and cowardly--these are the more obvious qualities of this euphemistic language. I cannot imagine a language more thoroughly and obstinately inartistic, and Mr. Reid's [B. L. Reid attacks Stein in *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein* (U of Oklahoma, 1958)] objections would be fair and mild enough if her course had ended here; but she was often able to take another step, the last available to protective speech: that of giving to her words the feelings that arise from things; that of creating from her words real objects, valuable for themselves, capable of an independent existence, as physical as statuary. In *Things As They Are* one can mark the isolated moments when she struck her special note, but in *Three Lives* she plays a constant music all her own....

Modern criticism has lived like a shrew upon paraphrase and explanation. Literature, it holds, is made of signs and the significance of literature, especially prose, lies in the meaning of these signs. The whole tendency of Gertrude Stein's work is to deny this. She was right to do so. Art is not a form of simple communication....

The attraction to the artist of the word made flesh, the love of the word as a resonance or a shape in space, is the least understood of all esthetic phenomena, being perhaps so purely a property of the creative consciousness and the first quality of which the insensitive are usually deprived.... In her effort to escape a purely protective language and make a vital thing of words, Gertrude Stein unsettled the whole of prose. Her abstractness enlarged the vocabulary of exciting words and made for some of the dullest, flattest, and longest literature perhaps in history. Her experiments in disassociation enlivened many dead terms and made her a master of juxtaposition. They also created bewildering and unpleasant scatterings of sound. Her success in uniting thought and feeling in the meaning and movement of speech showed that rhythm is half of prose, and gave it the power of poetry... It also nearly made her a mystic and sent her wildly after essences and types. She studied grammar creatively, as few writers have, though little concrete seemed to come of it, and she was sometimes made to sound an utter idiot... She rid her works of anecdote and scene and character and drama and description and narration one by one and in both a theoretical and applied way raised the serious question of their need and function. None of her contemporaries had her intellectual reach...

She reads easily when an impatient mind does not hasten the eye. We habitually seek some meaning and we hurry. But each word is an object to Gertrude Stein, something in a list, like the roll call of the ships, and lists are delightful simply for the words that are on them.... I think that sometimes she brings prose by its own good methods to the condition of the lyric. And everyone knows some perfectly beautiful lyrics that mean hardly anything.... Although her influence continues (it seems evident to me in the work of Barthelme and Beckett), many contemporary experimenters are merely, in ignorance, repeating her work, and often repeating it badly."

William H. Gass

"Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language"

Fiction and the Figures of Life

(Nonpareil Books 1971) 79-96

Picasso (1909)

Gertrude Stein

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.

Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one working and was one bringing out of himself then something. Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one bringing out of himself then something that was coming to be a heavy thing, a solid thing and a complete thing.

One whom some were certainly following was one working and certainly was one bringing something out of himself then and was one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of him.

Something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning, a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning.

One whom some were certainly following and some were certainly following him, one whom some were certainly following was one certainly working.

One whom some were certainly following was one having something coming out of him something having meaning and this one was certainly working then.

This one was working and something was coming then, something was coming out of this one then. This one was one and always there was something coming out of this one and always there had been something coming out of this one. This one had never been one not having something coming out of this one. This one was one having something coming out of this one. This one had been one whom some were following. This one was one whom some were following. This one was being one whom some were following. This one was one who was working.

This one was one who was working. This one was one being one having something being coming out of him. This one was one going on having something come out of him. This one was one going on working. This one was one whom some were following. This one was one who was working.

This one always had something being coming out of this one. This one was working. This one always had been working. This one was always having something that was coming out of this one that was a solid thing, a charming thing, a lovely thing, a perplexing thing, a disconcerting thing, a simple thing, a clear thing, a complicated thing, an interesting thing, a disturbing thing, a repellent thing, a very pretty thing. This one was one certainly being one having something coming out of him. This one was one whom some were following. This one was one who was working.

This one was one who was working and certainly this one was needing to be working so as to be one being working. This one was one having something coming out of him. This one would be one all his living having something coming out of him. This one was working and then this one was working and this one was needing to be working, not to be one having something coming out of him something having meaning, but was needing to be working so as to be one working.

This one was certainly working and working was something this one was certain this one would be doing and this one was doing that thing, this one was working. This one was not one completely working. This one was not ever completely working. This one certainly was not completely working.

This one was one having always something being coming out of him, something having completely a real meaning. This one was one whom some were following. This one was one who was working. This one was one who was working and he was one needing this thing needing to be working so as to be one having some way of being one having some way of working. This one was one who was working. This one was one having something come out of him something having meaning. This one was one always having something come out of him and this thing the thing coming out of him always had real meaning. This one was one who was working. This one was one who was almost always working. This one was not one completely working. This one was one not ever completely working. This one was not one working to have anything come out of him. This one did have something having meaning that did come out of him. He always did have something come out of him. He was working, he was not ever completely working. He did have some following. They were always following him. Some were certainly following him. He was one who was working. He was one having something coming out of him something having meaning. He was not ever completely working.

ANALYSIS

This one is certainly a portrait by one whom some were certainly following who was always charming to some. One whom some were following was certainly not always completely charming. This one whom some were following was certainly working and working and some were certainly following this one whose work was bringing something out completely charming for some following this one struggling for meaning that was certainly not working for everyone.

This is a prose poem that encapsulates Modernism with abstract Expressionism in words. Stein restricts her palate to a very limited number of words and phrases, repeating and arranging them as the equivalent of colors and brush strokes that culminate in a total portrait. Using only a few abstract words over and over, at first glance like the demented scribbles of a psychotic, calls attention to variations in tone, rhythm and implication—to a poetry of consciousness. Literally there are no colors and no representational picture, the poem is wholly abstract, yet it has a vitality, immediacy and momentum often lacking in the abstract later style of Henry James. One of her techniques for heightening a sense of immediacy and living in the present moment is repetition of the present participles *working*, *something*, *meaning*, *coming*, *charming* and *following*. Another technique is to repeat the modifiers *completely* and *certainly*, withdrawing and then reinstating them, which creates some complexity, uncertainty and a little tension.

The poem is a prototype of the stream-of-consciousness technique soon to be developed further by Richardson, Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. This technique of immersion in the mind expresses her main interest in psychology. She retains as punctuation only periods and a few commas, having a personal dislike of what she considered impediments to dramatizing the “continuous present.” Her stream of consciousness is at speech-level, in contrast to examples of pre-speech and subconscious levels in the later Modernists, notably the famous soliloquy of Molly Bloom at the end of *Ulysses* (1922) and most of those in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1932). Stein’s meticulously precise sentences with their many repetitions and varied intonations and rhythms are calculated form that gives *aesthetic* meaning to apparent nonsense. In all stream-of-consciousness writing, spontaneity is an illusion of rhetoric. The calculated form of “Picasso” is an expression of intellect, a Neoclassical value, and of her theory of effective writing. On the other hand, her subjective expressive style centered in the Self is Romantic. Modernists synthesize Neoclassicism and Romanticism.

“Picasso” consists of 12 paragraphs, 4 beginning “One whom” and the last 6 beginning “This one”—a phrase that occurs 55 times. Repetition is a dominant technique here, taking several forms. For example, the sentence “This one was one who was working” occurs 7 times and is further repeated in longer sentences over and over throughout the second half of the poem. All this repetition insists upon the simple fact that working hard and almost all the time—but “not completely working”—is the only way to gain a following as a great artist. The word “working” occurs 36 times, dramatizing creative vitality, productivity and the hard work required for both serious art and commercial success. Most of the poem emphasizes working and working--*insisting* repeatedly upon what differentiates the true artist from the many pretenders who hung out in cafes most of the time, a common sight on the Left Bank. The repetitions of words and phrases express the major themes: (1) working a lot; (2) producing art with “meaning”; (3) art that is “heavy,” “solid,” “complete,” “charming,” “struggling,” “clear,” “lovely,” “perplexing,” “disconcerting.”

“simple,” “complicated,” “interesting,” “disturbing,” “repellant,” “very pretty”; and (4) attaining a “following.” In 1909 some were certainly following Picasso--Gertrude Stein in particular.

The word “one” occurs 116 times, as if at any opportunity to include “the one” in her work, just as Stein did Picasso in social compositions at her salon. Lack of specificity in the poem and the extreme generality of the abstractions make the themes applicable to Gertrude Stein as well as to Picasso, an allegory of her own emergence parallel to Picasso. Just as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is actually about Gertrude Stein, “Picasso” is not really a portrait of Picasso after all, but a portrait of Gertrude Stein thinking about Picasso. Gendered pronouns are ambiguous in the case of Stein. She is honest enough to recognize something in herself as well as in Picasso that is “repellant.” Her lack of subordination evokes an overbearing personality and a driving ambition that stops at nothing. Also, after appearing 9 times in the first 6 paragraphs, the phrase “certainly following” does not appear in the next 6 until once more near the end, where it seems to confirm her own early judgment of Picasso and to indicate that to both of them, despite their unconventionality, what people think of them is supremely important, as if to be fulfilled one must be a success in social terms, which is more characteristic of Postmodernism than Modernism.

Picasso devolved in his career from the (1) traditional drawings and paintings done in his youth on view in the Picasso gallery in Barcelona—displaying obvious genius--through (2) representational Modernist expressionism into (3) pure abstract Expressionism. He ended by exploiting his commercial status, dashing off (4) slapdash abstractions for huge sums of money that are nothing but a few quick strokes of the brush--merely style and a signature. By Modernist standards, he sold out. Showings of these works look like a room full of the same image with imperceptible differences mass produced like soup cans by Andy Warhol. The elevation of style above substance is a defining characteristic of Postmodernism.

Michael Hollister (2014)

“I am only one, only one, only. Only one being, one at the same time. Not two, not three, only one. Only one life to live, only sixty minutes in one hour. Only one pair of eyes. Only one brain. Only one being. Being only one, having only one pair of eyes, having only one time, having only one life, I cannot read your MS three or four times. Not even one time. Only one look, only one look is enough. Hardly one copy would sell here. Hardly one. Hardly one.”

rejection slip
A. J. Fifield, editor

“There is oddly not nearly so much difficulty about reading the beginning of a book by Gertrude Stein like this book of hers called *Composition and Explanation* (Hogarth Essays) as there is in reading it later on when it gets nearer the end. It is all written like this with no punctuation of course but it does sound as if it meant something. Every now and then a word or two is written twice over twice over but of course that may be the printer. It is a little confusing to be told that people are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living, but probably it all works out somehow. She goes on like this for about thirty pages and then she says now that is all. But it isn't it isn't. It's only about half. She starts putting in headlines after that to symbolically no doubt make her meaning clearer, but it isn't clearer. It is ever so much not clearer. SITWELL. EDITH SITWELL.

She says that quite suddenly in capitals as if it were a line of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’ And in this part of the book all the parts of speech get mixed up anyhow as if she had been taking a lesson in typewriting. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog lazy dog lazy fox the quick jumps brown. There is only one sentence in this part which is English, it says toasted susie is my ice-cream, and that is not sense, is it? So awfully not sense. I suppose she must either think it looks pretty or think it sounds pretty when you read it but it doesn't it doesn't either it really doesn't.

Then every now and then she gives you a series of sentences which look like a spelling lesson or testing a new nib. Or sometimes it might be a French exercise. I make fun of him of her. I make fun of them. They make fun of them of this. They make fun of him of her. That sort of thing. I don't make fun of her. She makes fun of herself.

I don't understand why she says it is not usually her habit to mention anything. She is always mentioning things and leaving it at that. Weeks and weeks able and weeks. I can see she is mentioning something. But why does she mention it so often? They make them they make them they make them they make them they make them they make them they make them at once. It is very easy to type-write that sentence. But it would be easier still to write they make them repeat seven times at once. And it would save paper. She wastes paper. Baskets and paper, paper and baskets.

Now and then she seems to be telephoning. Eight eight and eight, eight eight and eight. Eight eight and eight and eight. She ought to have said eight double eight. They must address with tenderness. Yes but the girl at the exchange wouldn't address with tenderness. I think she must do it by taking hashish. Has she has his hashish? Hashish and haberdashers. Dash her hashish."

Ronald Knox
"Battology"
Review of *Composition as Explanation* (1927)

Michael Hollister (2014)