

RENDERING TENDER BUTTONS

by

CAROLINE YOUNG

(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

Despite increasing critical interest in Stein's genre-blurring work, there is a surprisingly small amount of *Tender Buttons* close reading to be found. More commonly, essays favor theoretical interpretations of the book that close read minimally or focus with great detail on syntactic investigations of poems as singular, contained units. Reading this text is a challenge as the language is dense, layered, and resists containment at every level. Although close reading *Tender Buttons* will not produce any stable or permanent meaning for the reader, listening between Stein's lines does draw the reader closer to the processes she uses to structurally hold the text together. One way to think about the title, among many, is to think of the text as an offering of connecting devices. It is then the reader's invitation to make those connections and to close those gaps, however temporary those closures may be. Through a creative performance of the text and cross-poem close-readings, this essay seeks to accomplish three things: to track and illuminate embedded visual and sonic patterns framing each section of the text; to illustrate the way these patterns interact to invite construction of meaning in the reader's mind; and to listen to Stein closely as she composes her explanation of the text and her philosophy on all creative process. In doing so, I argue that a sequential arc frames *Tender Buttons* as a book-length meditation on process and the universality of life's courses, be they natural, societal, or artistic. My essay charts Stein's addition, subtraction, and recycling to origin as she enacts an inevitable succession of renewal and survival. My essay also

offers one cultural reading to illustrate the byproduct of an imagination mingling with Stein's vocabulary and sequential logic.

INDEX WORDS: Stein, Gertrude, process, deconstruction, accumulation, syntax, language,.
Tender Buttons

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INTRODUCTION

Why write.

One-hundred years after publication, *Tender Buttons* maintains its power to flummox the most sophisticated of reader. Gertrude Stein's syntax disruption, sentence destabilization, and the multiplicity of meanings buried within individual words create startling linguistic compositions that continue to bemuse, if not bewilder, contemporary audiences. The work's dazzling effects polarize readers who either dismiss the writing as meaningless psittacism or embrace the work as Stein's great coded experiment. Finding pleasure in *Tender Buttons* undeniably begs active reader participation. In his essay "A Narrative in Undermine: Gertrude Stein's Multiplicity," Peter Quartermain observes that "what we do in reading [*Tender Buttons*] is not only watch the words composing, working, but join in. It affords a narrative of our own unfolding perceptions of language as it unfolds before us, and it is thus the reader's story as well as Stein's" (29). Put another way, Stein invites readers *not* to decipher authorized meaning from the text; rather, she asks them to enter the text more fully to create meaning anew.

It is true that readers take part in the reconstruction of any literary text while reading. With experimental writing, however, this proves a most difficult process as the reader is asked to capitulate his or her mastery over a medium used every day. This generates passionate if not violent reactions from those who perceive experimental literature as a provocation or challenge to one's intellect. In the case of *Tender Buttons*, I would argue that Stein's intent, however provocative, is for the reader to yield one's intellect in favor of sensory experience. In *Everybody's Autonomy*, Julianna Spahr states that, while reading Stein's work, "understanding frequently requires surrendering to

caresses of consciousness” (47). This surrendering invites the reader to reclaim the pleasure in language’s sound, patterns, and spatial relationships, trusting that the mind will organize the material as a natural byproduct of the sensory process. In *Tender Buttons*, meaning is illustrated as a secondary, centralizing affair; it is a moment in a continuous cycle, not an endpoint. Trusting one’s innate ability to find meaning leaves the conscious mind open to delight in the performance of language, and life as well.

The strong sensory response to *Tender Buttons* is perhaps what makes it so challenging to discuss; critical responses have progressively increased, however, since the second half of the twentieth century. Traditionally, critical readings of the text fall more or less into one of two camps: theoretically-framed cultural interpretations or syntactic investigations. The text has afforded multiple biographical readings emphasizing Stein’s lesbian status, the disintegration of Stein’s relationship with her brother, Leo, and the addition and increasing influence of Alice Toklas in the household during the writing of the text. The text has also lent itself to convincing feminist, Freudian, and queer theory readings, but no single argument has succeeded in taming *Tender Buttons*. The text simply will not be contained. In contrast to cultural interpretations, linguistic close readings of *Tender Buttons* favor either a broad overview of Stein’s processes or focused readings of one or two poems as contained, singular units.

What fascinates me personally about *Tender Buttons* is the complex interplay of devices Stein weaves to bridge poems and sections of the book into a unified reading experience. If Stein’s project was indeed a cubist experiment, the individual vignettes are not separate portraits any more than Ambrose Vollard’s nose and his eye in Picasso’s 1910 painting. Each collection is a portrait alive with movement and interaction between the constitutive parts of each vignette, and the portraits blur and overlap to encompass the book as a unified ‘un-still life.’ Where patterns meet the reader’s mind, meaning is formed. The bliss for the engaged reader is to sense these connections

and reimagine his or her world from these physical and abstract materials. This, for me, suggests that the true subject of *Tender Buttons* is process itself; the book is an enactment of process with multiple beginnings and no true end. If there is no ending and no original beginning, what, then, is the structural framework that holds the infinite openness of *Tender Buttons* in place? I have come to believe that the text's white space, or white sound, is the backbeat that holds Stein's wild portrait intact. These resonant gaps permit the "caresses of consciousness" that Spahr so eloquently describes.

In this essay, I have sought to accomplish three things: to track and illuminate this white noise or the embedded visual and sonic patterns framing each section of the text; to illustrate the way these patterns interact to invite the construction of meaning in the reader's mind (using my own reading as an enactment of this); and to listen to Stein closely as she composes her explanation of the text and her philosophy on all creative process. In doing so, I have found a sequential arc that frames *Tender Buttons* as a book-length meditation on the universality of life's courses, be they natural, societal, or artistic: the book charts addition, subtraction, and return to origin as an inevitable cycle of renewal and survival. My scoring of the text will chart Stein's processing of process in the book without attempting to contain it.

The following performance enacts an aesthetic transference from the concrete world of OBJECTS through the semi-concrete world of FOOD, to the abstract intangibility of language and thought in ROOMS. I argue that Stein takes the reader from the read world to an unwritten one. While doing so, she exploits the basic vocabulary of her time, painting a society in evolution through the overlooked materials that consume and are consumed by it. My essay will also track the text's successive regression from an established, affluent America to its colonial revolution from England. Her portrait journeys the reader through time, beyond centralized government control and past

centralized religious control. After sweeping away all containing sources of power, language being one, Stein leaves the reader with nothing but imagination, an imperfect return to origin, and hopefully faith in the process of beginning and beginning again.

While I have found the act of close reading *Tender Buttons* to be one of immense personal pleasure, listening to Stein has been most enlightening and influential to my own thinking and writing. Throughout the text, Stein defines things by what they are *not* and provides questions for the reader rather than answers. These techniques allow Stein to resist authorial control of the text while gently avowing her position. In the oral tradition, questions are posed as the politest way to get one's idea across and Stein's strongest claims come in the form of inquiry; she repeatedly invites the reader to consider her suggestion, her something new.

I realize that offering my own performance of the work will sound more like an answer and risks the shutting down of other readers' interpretations. I do not offer my ideas as anything other than *suggestion* and *illustration* to use Stein's language. I believe that my white noise is different from the next reader's. Every reader brings their own building supplies to bridge their own gaps in the work. Looking forward, I intend to use the data gained from my close readings to begin a digital, interactive version of *Tender Buttons* that rewards and engages the active reader of Stein. It is my hope that this might be useful as a pedagogical tool, a tracking device that links homophonic patterns, puns, historical references, theoretical claims, questions, definitions, symbols, and other framing devices embedded in Stein's poems along with the freedom to enter the text in any particular direction. Visual tracking would not only reward a reader who identifies a pattern but could help to flesh that pattern out in ways that the reader can use to build his or her own interpretive performance of the work. This might be used to transform classroom discussions of *Tender Buttons* from reluctant lecturing to communal experimentation and to hopefully shift the

predominant emphasis on OBJECTS to FOOD and ROOMS that are so often underexplored and undervalued. I am excited about this project and intend to carry it with me into a digital pedagogy post-doctorate to begin in the fall of 2014. It is my belief that Stein's text has something new to offer every generation of reader and it is the particular circumstance of each generation that will re-compose and re-imagine the text in new and exciting ways. I want to create something that furthers this process; it is the intended fruit of the labors you read here.

ACT I: OBJECTS

If it is baroque, don't fix it!

OBJECTS is the most widely studied and celebrated section of *Tender Buttons*. Part of this is due to its placement in the book but it is also the most accessible section for readers. The collection is full of nouns, and it is the most concrete section of the book. The objects are taken out of context by Stein, but it remains easiest for the reader to apply some sort of meaning to this section as the individual objects beg creation of a whole. In fact, it is through the reader's accumulative performance of the poems that meaning is formed. This is a meaning, however, that refuses to settle and hence leads to a variety of interpretive responses that evolve as culture evolves. Reading this portrait generates a sensation of spiraling that threatens to build out of control. Three structural patterns in OBJECTS that lead to this effect are synesthesia, containment, and sexuality. Stein is delighting in the intermingling of senses, objects, bodies, and cultures in a portrait contemplating addition; creative tension drives the collection forward to an accumulative breaking point. Ultimately, she paints the disruption of traditional order and enacts a process of reordering, using language to mirror culture. Stein's English, after all, is the American immigrant adaptation of a language rooted in England. Through her disruption of traditional syntax and layering of meaning, Stein reorders this traditional medium while concurrently challenging marital customs and British patriarchal tradition. If Britain represents centralized control, she uses her layered meanings to suggest multidirectional paths from that center in a new world, America.

Scene i: The Re(a)d World

Gertrude Stein believed it is the artist's function to renew sight and to see the modern world in its fractured splendor. To do this, she is asking the reader to examine his or her connection with

the world in all of its materiality, and she raises this issue by drawing attention to the overlooked objects in our lives that are covered in debris and contextual residue. The layered meanings in OBJECTS emphasize this over-use of language. In order to see the world anew, Stein fractures traditional syntax forcing the reader to shake off vocabulary's residue. She does not destroy the English vocabulary, but returns the reader to its multiple histories and origins, striving to create a new composition out of the old material. She does not return the reader to a purely white page, but attempts to drive toward that whiteness, by abstracting language from its traditional functions.

In *Tender Buttons*' famous opening vignette, A CARAFE THAT IS BLIND GLASS, numerous close readings have observed Stein's directive to approach her layered text as a system of pointing, a system of spreading multiple possibilities for the reader; it is a poem that invites the reader to see the world in a new way. But the poem also calls attention to a new way of hearing the world, a point that seems to be underplayed if not overlooked in other readings.

Much critical notice has been paid to the carafe's "single hurt color." This emotionally charged phrase certainly conflates human emotion with color, but, what strikes me foremost is the sound of the word 'hurt.' It aurally suggests a single 'heard' color, isolating a sound part from its whole as well as a single hue from the color spectrum. The carafe is over-full of a combined sonic, visual, and emotional experience. This over-containment of color has a damaging effect on both parties, hurting the color and rendering the container static. In order to renew the carafe, this color must be spread free.

The opening carafe's contained color is bruised-shape, or a deep shade of red. Red is a primary color; it suggests color's ultimate saturation point, symbolically suggesting passion, violence, sexuality, shame, and creative force. This is significant; amid the broad color vocabulary used in OBJECTS, Stein sets up an oppositional pattern of *red* (20 times) and *white* (20 times). The third poem, A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION, takes up Stein's relational application of color. If red is

heightened experience, then white is its absence. Considering the mingling of the two, Stein claims “any pink shows that and very likely it is reasonable.” *That*, being drawn pink, is a measurably more detached experience than *this*, presumably the red moment. Pink, the mid-ground between red and white is described as, “calm, ordinary,” and a state of “sweetness.” Pink experience is containable. This line is preceded with the observation that, “some increase means a calamity and this is the best preparation for three and more being together.” An increase in color’s intensity, or general accumulation, suggests a catastrophe or climactic conclusion; such periods of accumulation, be it of color or culture, cannot be sustained. With rise comes fall. Stein embraces this pattern as she muses, “What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in getting tired of it.” Rather than fear the inevitable fall, Stein’s claim is that pleasure is to be found equally in the release as it is in the rise of passionate pursuits.

On the color wheel, white is the absence of color, symbolizing purity, abstraction, and empty space; white is a blank canvas. Cultural whiteness, however, is defined in the vignette, A RED STAMP. White lilies, traditional symbols of purity, are defined as possessing the power to “exhaust noise and distance and even dust.” What happens, Stein asks, when these concrete symbols of purity become dusty and “dirt a surface that has no extreme grace?” When the symbols for purity become dirtied by time, they “need a catalogue” or a new system of classification. In OBJECTS, there is very little whiteness to be found or possessed. Stein mocks the illusion of whiteness in this materially-cluttered composition, as I will point out in her references to weddings and sexuality. In OBJECTS, the color is more often described as existing in shades of whiteness, suggesting that in this world whiteness is more often yellow, or light white, or blue green white, and in terms of matrimonial purity, white becomes an illusion, as in snow white.

Equally important is the sound connection Stein sets up between the colors red and white, suggesting literature. Every time one hears red, one also hears its homophone, the past-tense verb,

read, and white insinuates its rhyming companion, the verb, (to) write. Through this visual opposition and aural doubling, Stein enacts a tension between the read world, an experienced one, with the world that has yet to be written, the world of the blank page or canvas.

Stein conflates *red* with *read* and *white* with *write* along with write's homophone, *right*, in the next poem,

A BOX.

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analyzed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

Here, red builds out of kindness (flirtation, similarity); rudeness (lack of refinement, rawness) begets repetition, begetting kindness that takes the reader full circle to redness. When two things come together, red develops. Read, being the past tense of the verb, (to) read, suggests such repetition. Out of an eye, or a singular I, comes an opportunity for rethinking what has been read, an opportunity for change. Stein then states that order, or wholeness, suggests that a white way (right way, writer's way, unexpressed way) of being round, or harmonic, is something suggesting a pin (singular point of focus, writer's pen). A writer breaking things down into the rudimentary (raw) pieces or points of the circle will see the substance anew. She then plays with the word *point* as a verb; the green points beyond red, its complement on the color wheel, to direct the eye to another color, not to return the eye to red, or what has been read, but to point again, elsewhere. The composition's function is to keep the eye, or I, in movement. The resistance to still a red or read world will ensure the wholeness of vision, the abstract whiteness the artist is attempting to reach. Achieving this diminished point of singular abstraction is not disappointing but allows seeing anew.

Scene ii: She Objects

Stein's focus on objects emphasizes our relationship to things but her use of sonic layering devices challenge that relationship, creating tension between outmoded meanings and the possibilities of establishing new meaning. So what type of objects does Stein choose to observe? OBJECTS' vignette titles are domestic accoutrements that can be ascribed to one of four categories: containers, covers, things being contained, and things that are uncontainable. The categories are not easily demarcated. The obvious containers fall into three categories: a) feminine clothing and accessories, i.e. dress, shoes, hats, purse, boxes, and the female body, b) domestic service furnishings, i.e. cups, saucers, chairs, and bottles, or c) objects that contain artistic expression, i.e. piano, paper, drawing, and a book. These are categories that suggest the possible roles for the female: beautiful object, hostess, and artist. The objects functioning as covers indicate a build-up of elemental residue that diminishes the light of an object, or contrastingly provides protection from natural elements found outside the home, in the street of this portrait: sexuality and the weather. These objects are an umbrella, a cloak, a petticoat or a handkerchief. Be they covers or containers, all of these objects are domestic and female-oriented, but it is significant that they suggest an affluent culture; for the most part they are things to be found in a parlor or dining room, the two social spaces of the house. These are spaces traditionally furnished by women but set up to entertain outsiders who enter the home, potential suitors. This patriarchal system of courtship is ultimately a system of acquisition and coverage. Marriages are secured in order to pool resources ensuring security and comfort for two families. It is a gathering of likeness, often determined by the things that each family can offer in wealth accumulation.

Among a list of things that can or cannot be contained, there is water, coffee, a little (woman) called Pauline, a white hunter, a frightful release, a fire, a leave, and more. There is a drive toward containment and a resistance to entrapment that is being dramatized in this section.

Through this alternation between containers and containables, Stein is setting up a tension that enforces breakage and the need for release. Stein's early observation, "There can be breakages in Japanese," foreshadows the broken teacup and saucer and the careless water released in two later vignettes. Such breakages happen either through use or in the process of cleaning. Both cleaning and breakage contain a destructive element; cleaning suggests a renewal and return to form whereas breakage suggests an unrecoverable loss. Cleaning is a job traditionally delegated to females, but it is also the function of the artist. In moments of high calamity, breakage is required. *Tender Buttons* is an enactment of this – when the world is broken down to its parts and brought back together in new ways, what is lost, what remains, and what is ultimately to be gained?

Scene iii: Objects of His Affectation

The more acquisitive the culture, the more there is to be broken or cleaned to renewal. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein brings social breakage into the discreet unit of the family home and into rudimentary experience: sexuality. The masculine entry into the home, in the form of a suitor, suggests an inevitable breakage in a domestic dynamic as the chosen daughter will presumably be leaving the home. There are myriad readings of *Tender Buttons* emphasizing sexuality as a primary subject of the text. I maintain Stein uses sexuality as a structural pattern that illustrates creative process in a primal, universal way. Perhaps, after all, everything is not about sex; rather, sex is about everything. My perspective is certainly afforded by the generation in which I live, but a century after Stein's text was published, we still culturally struggle with sexuality as a natural, pleasurable exchange. It is not sexuality's end product that defines it to be a creative act, but its process; in OBJECTS Stein illustrates that sex is an orchestrated composition built of mingling and release. The first sexual explosion in the text is in the sentence, "A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing." This sentence connects sexuality with creative

expression and delicate breakage. In this instance, whole vision in the form of coupling creates an orgasmic crescendo that rises as singing or the sonic release of the body being broken open, or being trimmed. Trimmed doubles as sexual slang and a delicate and focused form of cutting. As a tailor or butcher cuts off the inessential cloth or meat, the creative sexual act releases a build-up of energy seeking liberation. This trimming gives way to a clearing, a release into abstract emptiness. The depiction of sexuality as both redness and whiteness suggests that creativity is a tangible, outer experience as well as an abstract inner one.

Throughout *OBJECTS*, Stein conflates creativity with sexual expression and explores the consequences of its containment and release. This sexual co-action is described as pleasurable, a sweet thing. The subsequent “disgrace,” or necessary falling action, comes “not in carelessness nor even in sewing” (an act that requires a meticulous carefulness,) but it “comes out of the way.” The fall comes out of the way the creative act is put together; it is the unnecessary that has been trimmed in the creative orchestration. Culturally, the disgrace from sexual pleasure comes from the outer world’s judgment and perceptions, not from the actual creative production. The purely pleasurable creative act, particularly for the female, is only socially determined to be a disgrace. It is centralized authority that contains individual creative effort.

In contrast to this pleasure-based sexuality, there is the accumulation of language that suggests courtship ritual in the text; such traditional rituals relegate the female as contained sexual object to be attained by the suitor. Such rituals depend on layer-upon-layer of containment. There is a repetition of sewing; a dress is being fabricated through this text. The dress is likely a wedding dress, as Stein describes: “a splendid address a really splendid address is not shown by giving a flower freely, it is not shown by a mark or by wetting. Cut, cut in white, cut in white so lately. Cut more than any other and show it.” The splendid ‘dress’ being created is conflated with the marital promise of a splendid address. Giving a flower freely suggests sex without marriage; this will not

achieve a fabulous new address for the female. The splendid dress, or address, is not achieved by wetting, or sexual arousal. The dress covers a woman's sexuality and confirms a woman as pure, unbroken vessel. The wedding night suggests that the female who trades her sexuality for security is no more than an object to be cut into. She will then be a container purely possessed for one man's exploitation.

Stein questions this suggestion of untapped purity in *A PIECE OF COFFEE* when she remarks, "A not torn rose-wood color." Aurally translated, this becomes, "a not-torn rose would color," and one hears, that a woman who remains sexually pure will still decay. Later in the poem she imagines, "supposing there was no reason for a distress and more likely for a number, supposing there was no astonishment, is it not necessary to mingle astonishment." Here, she conflates the dress with distress, asking the reader to imagine a world without such virginal charades. The speaker can choose to *not* imagine a world with no creative or sexual wonder, or experience, and no astonishment. Imagine a woman not caving in to these cultural value systems that inhibit her creative impulses.

In the poem, *A LITTLE CALLED PAULINE*, the use of the article 'a' defines Pauline as an object being portrayed, but Pauline also develops as a character in the vignette. Stein plays off of fairy tales in the line, "Nearer in fairy sea, nearer and farther, show white has lime in sight...I hope she has her cow. Bidding a wedding." The pun on Snow White recalls the innocence of the ideal feminine, and her ultimate object or goal: a wedding to a prince. A cow registers the image of dowry and a woman's dowry being a better bid for a wedding. If one thinks of the bride as a piece of meat to be cut into, the image of the cow doubles as the bride's sexuality being intact. Lime in sight suggests corrosive buildup. It also suggests Snow White's goal to be seeded. Lime, however, is a bitter fruit, mocking Snow White's aspirations. Lime in sight also sounds like Time is in sight; the

biological clock is ticking, and lime insight, suggesting a bitter insight into the truth of this matrimonial charade.

Stein mocks literary references to the feminine romantic experience elsewhere. In *COLORED HATS*, Stein riffs off references to Louisa May Alcott's famed coming of age novel, *Little Women*, in lines like, "a big delay a big delay that makes more nurses than little women really little women." One hears the containment of "a big day" in "a big delay," and Alcott's title, that was a very popular girl's book with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century American audience. Does a big delay create a spinster who turns to nursing in lieu of marriage? An alternate option for the female appears two pages later in *SUPPOSE AN EYES*: "Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton." This line echoes the repetition of the phrase "little women," yet distorts it into what sounds like prostitution; ladies conflated with mutton, aging meat to be sold on the sex market.

In the vignette called "A PETTICOAT," Stein challenges the ability to suppress the female body's creative expression. A petticoat, or feminine undergarment, is meant to contain the female body while protecting the outer clothing from the female body's functions. The vignette reads, "A light white a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm." A petticoat is a light white, not entirely pure as it cannot successfully contain the feminine body. A disgrace suggests a fall. If one considers the female as an artist or creative force, a light write produces an ink spot; the creative act leaves its mark and the petticoat cannot suppress evidence of the act committed. The disgrace can otherwise be perceived as a rosy charm, or a souvenir. The female, virginal form already contains a redness that is only being covered by the white wedding dress. The dress cannot hide a woman's creative nature; it is rather a contained illusion of purity that Stein challenges.

A woman's sexual experience is also connected with commerce in this text, as Stein sets up the traditional images of the prostitute or the bride-to-be. Both of these options limit a woman's worth in a patriarchal value system. Fiscal security for either female is dependent on the male as

customer or possessor of the female body. Two male characters in the text are identified as symbols of empirical culture, the soldier and the king. First, the image of the soldier appears in SUPPOSE AN EYES. Stein insinuates the soldier to be on the attack: “A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes.” A white dress, suggesting bride, is in sight, and ensign, bearing rank. But if marriage is the objective, this collection of worn lace suggests the possibility of one, if not more, marriage proposals, or multiple females who, seduced to sighing, have been deflowered and tossed aside. There is a try-before-you-buy option being played out. Perhaps it simply means extensive sexual experience. Either way, the sexual potency and freedom of the male is emphasized, as Stein chants the military-sounding drill, “Go red go red, laugh white.” This suggests the soldier aggressively seeks multiple sexual experiences and mocks the purity of the sex act. Immediately following this is the collapse of purity into rubbed purr, “in rubbed purr get.” The man obtains sexual pleasure, but it is the women who carry the ethical burden as they are “Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton.” These women are saddled up and selling their hides in what should be the “beautiful beautiful beautiful” sexual experience. Or, is it that Stein finds the honest exchange of sex for cash more beautiful than the bride who contains her sexuality entirely, becoming nothing more than worn lace? All of this content is sexually charged but Stein repeatedly mingles sex, commerce, and artistic expression into the portrait, as she repeatedly illustrates the consequences and illusions of containment that society prescribes.

This patriarchal prescription is chided in CUTLET as Stein writes, “A blind agitation is manly and uttermost.” Blindness echoes the section’s opening: the full container that needs release. Traditionally, sexual potency, or fullness, is considered a masculine thing and is driven by a need for release in the female form, hence the play on what is culturally uttered-most about sex; the poem also reinforces the function of the female as a thing that is udder-most, the carrier and milk provider for offspring. The vignette title suggests the creation or seeding of a child, in the form of a cutlet.

This notion of woman as seed container connects to the sold 'hole' that the woman becomes in another poem RED ROSES. Once the rose has been 'read' and the pink flesh has been cut, the sold hole is less hot or desirable, on the sexual market.

The second male figure in OBJECTS is an image that is created through the act of courtship; that of the meadowed king. He appears as one potential end-goal in the ultimate vignette of the OBJECTS sequence. As the king represents the cumulative pinnacle of masculine power, the term object might be reconsidered. An object is not only a thing, but it is also the end-result of an ambitious undertaking, such as a game. If the object is for the man to be made king, one must consider what the object of this patriarchal game is for the female. And, like the female, the king is an object as well. In consideration of Stein's developing argument on marriage, the reader also must consider the implication of the present-tense verb, objects. Does the artist object to this material-based marriage objective? What is the object of creative expression: release or possession?

Before considering the final vignettes of the sequence that position this question as a multi-layered climactic crisis, one must consider the sexually ambiguous character that lies between the king and the soldier, the white hunter. The white hunter in Stein's text signals a more complex rendering of culture's destructive power and the drive toward breakage for change. The brief vignette, A WHITE HUNTER, reads, "A white hunter is nearly crazy." One's first response is to imagine an aggressive, imperialist male who Stein perceives as 'wild' with a thirst for domination. However, a second reading of the line suggests the hunter to be a non-gender specific seeker of white. As white represents the abstract, unwritten world, this suggests a pioneering expedition, or an aesthetic drive to find a world that has yet to be domesticated. Considering this desire to be the result of being overloaded with cultural clutter, Stein also suggests homophonically that the person is 'ear-ly' crazy, overcome with the overused language of the time, now reduced to noise. Therefore, the artist is conflated with the imperialist, the pioneer, or even the immigrant in a quest for abstract,

unused space. Both seek a blank canvas to re-imagine human experience. The word hunter also implies hunger, as if this white space might fulfill a basic, human need.

Scene iv: Kingdoms Come

If this patriarchal world has been overly *read*, is there an alternative? The final three poems of OBJECTS set up a mounting tension to be further explored in the FOOD collection of the book. In them, Stein establishes the various objectives and consequences of the sexual or creative act; through language, she ties sexuality and artistic expression to the social and political development of a nation. Numerous readings have expertly read this sequence of vignettes both as feminist and heteronormative mocking of courtship rituals and sexuality, but the vignettes transcend these readings into a gentle mocking of all social and political systems that favor accumulation and stasis over creative expression and change. For example, the title of the poem PEELED PENCIL, CHOKE most clearly suggests the pencil, or artists' tool that eventually peels down into uselessness. Sexually, it connotes the male orgasm rising to a lack of breath, or the psychological "little death," the French reference to male orgasm. The body of the poem offers the alternative phrase, "Rub her coke." Rub her coke sounds like Rub her coat. The choking of the male is far more violent than the rubbing of the female, and suggests the female sexual experience is far more pleasure-based than the male. However, if one reads the second line as Rubber coat, or rubber cock, one might read the peeled pencil as sex without protection that leads to potential pregnancy and sexual stasis; the poem's body suggests that with a covering, the sexual act is freed from the trapping of pregnancy for the male and the female. It at least suggests release without the female container being immediately possessed with a human form. It is an act of possession and claiming, which subtly suggests the possession of American soil by the British.

The political reading becomes more clear in the penultimate poem, IT WAS BLACK, BLACK TOOK. The artist has now progressed from the pencil to ink. The act of writing over the

clean, white page suggests a more permanent mark. Stein, however, then states that “Black ink best wheel bale brown” or even the best black ink will turn, as a wheel turns, bale brown. Bale means to gather, suggesting the ink will gather into a brown mess. Bale also suggests sorrow or woe, suggesting that evidence of the creative experience will eventually decay and lose all distinction. Where there was seeding in the previous poem, there is gathering or baling here. This conflation of the artist with the seeding and reaping of the land is a theme explicitly developed in FOOD.

It is the second line of the poem that contains the culturally charged line, “Excellent not a hull house, not a pea soup, no bill no care, no precise no past pearl pearl goat.” If the first line suggests that the creation of the book is more significant than the end product itself, this packed line emphasizes the liberated creative flow, distinguishing upper-class excellence from those hungry and struggling. Excellent is the condition where one has excelled, or arrived at a point beyond all others. In contrast, a hull house literally is a house that contains the outer seed coverings; this suggests the vagina. If the vagina is a hull house, it is also the emptied container of the passed pearl. Beyond the sexual reading, a hull is the belly of a ship. So, a hull house represents the ship itself carrying poor, hungry people to a new world. These immigrants are not established; they live outside of the previous domestic space containing Japanese saucers and china patterns. So, their journey is in contrast to the state of excellence, or a place. The hull house also makes reference to Jane Addams’ and Ellen Gates Starr’s Hull House, established in 1889 as a settlement designed to educate, feed, and assimilate immigrants establishing roots in America. Here, new possibilities might be found for those with “no bill, no care, and no past pearl, pearl” *got*, or, “pearl goat” in the form of low-income dowry. This state of immigration is not excellence but it is also not static. These under-valued outsiders are the working backbone and beginning of something new, just as the undervalued artist creates the world anew. The Hull House also distinguishes America from Britain as it worked to

educate women and offer them a future that was not previously afforded them in the world where choices were limited to the virgin, the whore, or the nursemaid.

OBJECTS culminates in the erotically charged poem 'THIS IS THE DRESS, AIDER.' The vignette, for a third time, has a two-sentence structure that indicates two paths; a decision is to be made, perhaps for the young Pauline, perhaps for the reader. First, the dress is presented in the title. Based on earlier connotations with dress as address, one can also consider 'this' to be the place the reader has arrived. Contrastingly, the dress has also been conflated with distress. Aider is a noun in English meaning helper but it also doubles as the French verb 'to help.' The line then reads two ways: This is the dress, helper. Or, this is distress, help her. The poem's body itself, sets up a tension between sexual pleasure and sexual possession, both relying on sound devices to liberate these cloaked, potential narratives. In the first sentence, the phrase sounds like "ate her I ate her I wow wow stop touch ate her wow stop the muncher, muncher munchers." This sounds like a female orgasm and is suggestive of oral intercourse, but it focuses on the highest point of release with a begging for a conclusion as such heightened, pleasurable experience is not sustainable. The use of 'munchers' suggests consumption. In contrast is the second line that reads "A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let." The Jack is in line for the throne; his object is to become king. The king is potentially mellowed by courtship, as he is bedded or wedded and put to the meadow as the family bull. The "jack in" also suggests the sexual act that can kill the potential female who winds up as queen. Jack can also Jill her, referencing the nursery rhyme, meaning he can name and partner her. But, in the nursery rhyme, Jack falls down and breaks his crown. Jill, in the rhyme and suggestively in this patriarchal system, is doomed to come tumbling after. The woman in this exchange is destroyed by the man's doing or undoing; even though she is presumably made Queen, she is a powerless figurehead whose fate is in the hands of the king. And the king will eventually fall. This progression of the Jack, Queen, and King makes a royal flush and "to let"

becomes a “toilet.” This suggests a non-recoverable falling action to come. Or, to consider this eventual fall as an absence, the kingdom is up “to let” or to be occupied by another imperialist invader. In contrast to the rising action of the first line, a sexual crescendo that leads to complete digestion, this patriarchal composition is an outdated, Victorian concept and one to be flushed or replaced. If Jack represents America to England’s king, is it at risk of repeating history or will America resist the patriarchal impulse of centralized power?

In OBJECTS, the liberated, pleasure-based act of creation creates an eruption of energy that actively seeks its own conclusion, echoing Stein’s early question, “What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in getting tired of it.” All systems reach a point of climax; this contained world Stein has composed is itself on the brink of breakage. This is all played out in the domestic and on the street below. To dismantle the drive toward possession and establish a new way of thinking about creative life cycles, the individual must be willing to let go of the objects that contain human life force.

ACT II: FOOD

What is the difference a day makes.

Whereas OBJECTS spirals into an accumulative crescendo, FOOD is a sequence that demonstrates the breaking of the whole and an analysis of its attendant parts. While OBJECTS enacts layering and multiplicity, FOOD delights in subtraction and division. The art of food preparation, after all, is measured by the joy of its deconstruction. Stein's orchestration of sequential constructions and deconstructions in FOOD exploits color, sound, time, and inter-functional relationships to illustrate life's continuous processes. Conscious attendance to this endless cycling, according to Stein, is harmony.

Stein calls attention to FOOD's related parts with her opening ingredient list; food items are listed that reflect an ordering of four separate meals. Significantly, she begins at the ending, offering a dinner of either roast beef or mutton. As the text shifts from the culmination of one day to the beginning and completion of the next, Stein's vocabulary divides time into hours, days into seasons; time is spreading into natural cycles. Meanwhile, land is demarcated by functions that regress from golf courses to the creation of states, towns, uncharted territories, acres of farmland, and ultimately, to the American colonies on the verge of revolution. To illustrate this backward cycling, Stein also begins with words weighted with meaning; time is spent in reflection on meaning as something being gathered into wholeness. Vocabulary in FOOD is then literally digested into syllables and sound parts. As I chart these patterns, I argue that Stein's enactment of linguistic gathering and spreading transports the reader from the present moment to America's roots; this reading

emphasizes the relationship Stein is portraying between culture and the language that reflects its rise and its inevitable fall.

Scene i: Harmony is in an Order

In FOOD, Stein is interested in the deconstruction of patterns and how it leads to a reshaping of the whole in the act of evolutionary turning. She announces in ROASTBEEF her intent to illustrate this relationship through sound composition. Stein writes, “a sound, a whole sound is not separation, a whole sound is in an order.” Here, whole sound is defined as not-separation. This emphasizes the verb, the choice made. Whole sound is also not an order but *in* an order. In FOOD, she persists in focusing on the organization of the parts to create the whole experience; a recipe is a harmony of not-separation. The whole cannot consume the parts and maintain vitality. In an argument against such possession, she claims, “claiming nothing, not claiming anything, not a claim in everything, collecting claiming, all this makes a harmony, it even makes a succession.” Here, Stein illustrates her claim compositionally. To claim means to demand or take ownership of something. Stein argues against this possessive drive, asserting a resistance to claiming, then moves to the claim that a language does not necessarily have to make a claim and, instead, can exist for sound pleasure and not argument. Aware of the irony embedded in her claim, she includes the collecting of the word claiming – all of this makes harmony and a succession, or a sequential arrangement. This ordering creates a succession and a success. It is simultaneously an act of addition and subtraction.

Stein is also concerned with measuring movement in FOOD. The opening lines of ROASTBEEF emphasize place and time and the integral relationship between inner and outer experience through pointing, dramatized by the pronoun *there*. Stein writes:

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling.

Stein suggests that all of life's creative processes happen in and around the place of the body. While the internal subconscious is 'asleep', the life outside the body is full of lived experience, the red or 'read' world returns. It is in daybreak that meaning can be grasped, after a night of processing and digesting the previous day. The word *meaning* most commonly means significance or purpose, but according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *mean* also is defined as fellowship or sexual intercourse. *Mean* also suggests the central space in a sequence or pairing. And, it suggests moaning or lamentation. This loaded term will be significant in interpreting the morning vignettes to come. Therefore, in the morning, there is a creative composition of integration and intercourse.

Contrastingly, in evening, feeling has returned; the body reacts to the day's experiences in a physically tangible way. Feeling is an external sensation but it also reflects internal, emotional responses. So, if morning represents the central or the space of mingling, evening represents the inner and outer senses, polarized. Stein posits that it is through these sensory experiences that change develops. ROASTBEEF continues with:

In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching.

It is through the relationship between inner and outer feeling, that there is a progression from resting to mounting. This suggests the rising, creative impulse. Then comes a re-signation, and a re-cognition, and a re-currence. Feeling the world leads to a rethinking of the world and a rechanneling of the current of one's life toward outward expression. This cycling connects lived experience of sensation and feeling as a means of reordering one's internal world. This, in turn, is released as new, creative expression.

If evening is feeling or the evening out of inner and outer experience, Stein illustrates this through the pairing of ROASTBEEF with MUTTON as successive vignettes. Roast beef is a cut of meat prized for its wholeness while mutton is cheaper, ground meat held together in an ordering of

its constitutive parts. This awareness of the parts in service to the whole is reflected in the opening lines of MUTTON. Stein writes, “A letter which can wither, a learning can suffer and an outrage which is simultaneous is principal.” This suggests that just as language grows weak from overuse, knowledge wanes. This invokes a violent response for renewal that is at once sensory, significant, and original, all meanings contained in the word principal. Origin, embedded in the word original reflects that return is necessary to renewal. This is why students, or those who are growing in knowledge, are “merciful and recognized they chew something.” Students digest the past and, being re-cognized, they break it down to its parts for total comprehension. This reinforces Stein’s developing illustration that to evolve, one must be willing to change; to change, one must process and reconsider what came before; through an ingestion of the past, the future will spiral beyond the looped pattern of behavior into something new.

To return to ROASTBEEF, Stein argues that the problem with attachment and worship of the whole is that:

The whole thing is not understood and this is not strange considering that there is no education, this is not strange because having that certainly does show the difference in cutting, it shows that when there is turning there is no distress.

The whole is not able to be appreciated for its parts; this lack of comprehension cannot create anything new or strange. Then, in defining the position of *there*, Stein states that pointing *there* is a resistance to analysis. Therefore, *this*, representing the now is not new but an extension of the past. In contrast, the second half of the sentence suggests that *having that*, or the act of possessing the *that* of yesterday reveals the diminishment in cutting that Stein has already exhibited. Sonically, Stein also suggests, “halving” *that* shows the difference in cutting as well. The noun is a stationary thing, the whole, but it is the verb that creates the turning that is necessary to ward off distress. It is during periods of accumulation, *having*, or separation, *halving*, that there is turning and change.

Stein concludes ROASTBEEF with the theoretical question, “Why is the perfect reestablishment practiced and prized, why is it composed.” Here she asks, why is this exact replication of yesterday something to be valued? Why is there no change? In mimicry of yesterday’s composition, there is no delight and no mathematics. It is stasis. In contrast, MUTTON concludes with a repetition of its own, but it is a repetition of process instead of product. Stein writes, “a meal in mutton, mutton, why is lamb cheaper, it is cheaper because so little is more. Lecture, lecture and repeat instruction.” Stein also suggests here that the grinding of the whole into its parts, or the stripping back to origin is in fact valuable, because less attachment to the product equals more freedom to develop. The doubling of the term lecture suggests a reprimand, and yet it also suggests a repeated performance. One does not repeat the composition, as in ROASTBEEF’S practice; one rather repeats instruction, or the recipe based on past experience. This instruction is reinterpreted in a performance of the now.

Scene ii: In the Meaning There is Mourning

Transitioning to morning, the opening paragraph of BREAKFAST announces renewal:

A change, a final change includes potatoes. This is no authority for the abuse of cheese.
What language can instruct any fellow.

If one considers a life spanning a single day, this daybreak is a return to origin or beginning. And, as Stein emphasized in the opening to ROASTBEEF, this move from the inside/out of morning is that final change. The word *final*’s first definition according to the OED is simply that which comes at the end of a word or series. Stein plays against the idea of finality as completion by connecting it to the potato. Potatoes are tubers, plants who store energy underground, and multi-eyed perennials, suggesting annual renewal combined with a plurality of vision and possibility. One might view this daybreak as a resurrection with multiple avenues for growth. This also reflects myriad ways one might read Stein’s text, reflecting an anti-authorial vision that sets up the second line of the vignette. But if the line suggests that *this*, as in the text

itself, *is no authority*, the line falls into seeming nonsense; what is *the abuse of cheese*? Does Stein suggest the overuse of cheese, commonly used as a potato topping or covering? Does the abuse of cheese cloud the function and vision of the potato? One of the ultimate sequences in the morning section is an eventual drying up of the cow's resources. This stalling of the cow in an exploitation of her milk leads to an empty pail. After reading the entire morning section, the opening vignette seems to caution against such abuse of one's resources. The promise of renewal is not permission to overindulge. The final line of the opening vignette also appears to be an anti-authorial challenge: what language can instruct any fellow? But, read again, the line suggests that what-language, meaning language that raises questions rather than answers, can instruct any partnership or pairing. According to the OED, the adjective *what* means "quick, active." What-language suggests a form of communicating that emphasizes active, creative interrogation as opposed to a drive toward the static known. As outlined in MUTTONS, such instability brings teaching that brings conscious presence.

This theme of renewal and abuse is exhibited in the breakfast foods chosen by Stein, foods that, like OBJECTS, emphasize the culturally-loaded color opposition of red and white. Two key white components of the BREAKFAST portrait are MILK and EGGS; products of the body that are released into morning. Milk and eggs are life-sustaining by-products of the reproductive system and symbols of purity and the pure functions of the female body. In contrast, the red APPLE is the fruit or offspring of a tree, the product of the tree's procreative action and the original symbol of temptation and fallen grace. These red and white breakfast foods illustrate the cyclic nature of creativity in the body and in nature, the act of reading and writing the world anew. At the same time, they reflect the blending of the inner and outer world and the need for constant mingling or creative invention to perform the cycle. Most

significantly, perhaps, they reinforce the dual, traditional notions of the creative female: the Madonna or the whore, the container of chastity or the processor of sin.

MILK, however, has been split or spilled into a two-vignette sequence and is activated into a medium of exploitation. The first vignette suggests the taking of milk from the cow, its goods being stolen presumably from the farmer, and all of the cow's blisters or blisses are contained in the cup. By poem's end, the line "guessing again and golfing again and the best men, the very best men" suggests an exhaustion of this process. Guess suggests to hazard a chance but it is also a term for a cow's barrenness. The men, who have over-stripped the cow's fertile resources are not offering the pasture to the cow for her nutrition, but are now using the field for golf. Their recreation trumps the cow's fertile re-creation.

This outward creative barrenness is then explored internally in the second vignette of MILK. The speaker instructs to "Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter needles and a guess a whole guess is hanging. Hanging hanging." The play off of climbing inside the udder as a needling under the skin is an investigation, a shift from the outer to the inner experience. However, the cow's inside is utterly needless as the cow is not yielding milk. This suggests a hanging, or a static death of creativity. It also connotes violence in its repetition. Stein, again, points to the stasis of an authoritative, accumulative system that yields no creative communal interchange. Finally, TAILS is the tail-end of breakfast, leaving the reader with

Cold pails, cold with joy no joy.

A tiny seat that means meadows and a lapse of cuddles with cheese and nearly bats,
all this went messed. The post placed a loud loose sprain. A rest is no better. It is
better yet.
All the time.

For the first time, Stein shifts into past tense, suggesting the effects of creative stasis: a lapse of cuddles and over-production run to a mess. This leaves the seated individual nearly bats or ear-ly crazy (in an echo of OBJECTS' white hunter.) Stein finally asserts that a rest or arrest is no better,

or butter. In contrast, *it*, or emphasis on the singular present, is better, or brings butter, all of the time.

This abstract emphasis on the present and the singular is Stein's shift from the drive toward possession and stasis. The repeated illustration of the cow is commonly read as an attack on traditional marriage, or heteronormal relationships. But, with a larger view, it is an attack on cultural systems that rely on accumulation that creates a loss of balance in creative distribution. The overproduction of milk from a cow that is not being reconstituted is barrenness and creates a non-sustaining culture. To recall Stein's opening line from *FOOD*, "in the morning, there is meaning," she has now illustrated that interior space as a space of creative emptiness. The cow, or female container, has been dried up by the farmer. As the day moves forward, Stein temporally shifts backward.

Scene iii: Eating Our Words

In the breakfast sequence, Stein called for the breakage of time into man-measured units stating, "Cut the whole space into twenty-four spaces." In contrast, the lunch poems enact a seasonal measurement; a shift from spring to winter time is charted. Likewise, Stein's emphasis on color's meaning from *BREAKFAST*, though used in the lunch sequence, begins to give way to greater emphasis on words and their sound parts. As the breakfast sequence contains hangovers from the world of *OBJECTS*: color, dowry, and the drying up of resources, the lunch section demonstrates sequential disintegration of meaning alongside the claiming and demarcation of a developing America.

A key pattern of the lunch poems is the marking of land. The first sentence of *LUNCH* conflates sound and political land division, stating, "Luck in loose plaster makes holy gauge and nearly that, nearly more states, more states come in town light kite, blight not white." To look in loose plaster, one might find a hole, a holy measurement, or a promised land. And then come more

states. Again, Stein hints at the significance of sound with her play on the ear, in *nearly*. There are nearly more states being developed, but there is also more being stated; the ears hear more as the new world is developing. In the poem, *CAKE*, Stein muses, “This is today. A can experiment is that which makes a town, makes a town dirty.” The will to make a creative move creates a community, but a can is a container suggesting that the experiment of colonialization is one of containing the land. In this poem, Stein then conflates potatoes with community, sonically, with “Two bore, bore what, a mussed ash.” The coupling of two, conflated with the potato or tuber, bore what – a mussed ash, a messed ash or a mustache. So, the coupling created decay as well as growth? The pun on tuber again pushes the reader beneath the surface. A mustache suggests culture as it reflects a manicured man. Stein is expanding her text into the broader social structure the way a society is born from the ground up. First, there is the settling, then the creation of states and putting down roots. In the poem, *BUTTER*, Stein conflates the creation of states with fertile increase, writing, “It is a need it is a need that a flower a state flower. It is a need that a state rubber. It is a need that a state rubber is sweet and sight and a swelled stretch.” This development of America into states is a rising creative and cultural inter-action, mirroring the rise toward sexual satisfaction through lubrication, hence, butter.

As Stein organizes time through division of land, she also composes the food items in the lunch sequence according to progressive seasonal shifts that echo cultural changes. *LUNCH* opens in springtime, kite-flying weather. The language in this opening poem calls to mind the end of winter: words like blight, skate, and flake suggest snowfall and ice-skating. The hen is cold and the coffee is cold but it concludes with “a green mass is a gem.” Or, the discovery of a new land is a prize at the end of a cultural winter. As the poems proceed, to *RHUBARB* and *SINGLE FISH*, *CAKE*, *CUSTARD*, and *POTATOES*, the spring is rising. *CAKE* concludes with “a little leaf upon a scene an ocean any where there, a bland and likely in the stream a recollection green land. Why

white.” This suggests the journey made. This green land represents a new, unwritten space. As the year progresses beyond BUTTER, the poems sequentially connect END OF SUMMER and SAUSAGES. Is this the end of the summer sausages? The milk-producing animals have now been ground into winter meat? It is at this point the foods shift to winter vegetables and meats. It is at this fall that the poem COOKING returns the reader to mingling and the wedding ritual. A courtship is cooking the belle into a receptacle: “Alas, alas the pull alas the bell alas the coach in china, alas the little put in leaf alas the wedding butter meat, alas the receptacle, alas the back shape of mussle, mussle and soda.” The little lass has been coached in china patterns and is ready to become the wedding meat. Finally, it is in PASTRY where the bed has been made, “cutting shade, cool spades and little last beds, make violet, violet when.” These are winter beds, made to sustain violent, violent winds. Violets are of course perennial plants that can sustain such cold weather and are often used to brighten up the bed in the dead of winter. The lunch sequence exhibits a progression of time and a progression of cultural development: immigration, settling, settling in for the violent winds of change. It is important then, to also note the sound work Stein is doing in the lunch section that reflects alternate approaches.

These opposing routes are enacted in the repetition of sections with the same name. I will look at two of these, POTATOES and CHICKEN, with a consideration of their differing functions.

POTATOES.

Real potatoes cut in between.

POTATOES.

In the preparation of cheese, in the preparation of crackers, in the preparation of butter, in it.

ROAST POTATOES.

Roast potatoes for.

POTATOES has been composed as a unit of three sequences that illustrate accumulation and time. First the potatoes cut in between the soil, or rise. Secondly, the potatoes are processed and used for various manners of dining, with the emphasis not on the potato, but on the other ingredients served alongside it. These foods reflect basic nourishment being met and the spreading of potato's functions. The third vignette doubles into a fourth. The potatoes are being roasted, likely aside the main course of roast beef. The word *for* also suggests its homophone, four, and the sequence settles into exact repetition, suggesting stasis. This is a mirroring of a rising society: what begin at the root rises into cultural establishment. Potatoes move from the earth to the dining room.

In contrast, the sequence entitled CHICKEN evolves four times in a succession of sound-play moving from meaning to nonsensical joy.

CHICKEN.

Pheasant and chicken, chicken is a peculiar third.

CHICKEN.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird.

CHICKEN.

Alas a doubt in case of more go to say what it is cress. What is it. Mean. Potato. Loaves.

CHICKEN.

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in.

This section performs a reverse function to POTATOES. The first section is counting birds. The second section layers third bird with word, and the composition creates a sonic evolutionary turn into a dirty bird. The third section breaks down logic “in case of more go to say what it is cress.” Say what it express? What does it mean? The chicken is positioned in the mean between

potato and loaves, possibly. But the fourth section mimics the music of the chicken's voice, "stick stick call then" or "chick, chick, call the hen." "Stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken." And Stein playfully calls attention to "sticking in a[n] extra succession, sticking in." Whereas POTATOES fell into static mimicry, CHICKEN breaks free through sound release. The once dirtied and overused birds come alive in a new song. We shift from accumulation to lyric burst, in the between.

Scene iv: Eating Our World

It is in the second day's dinner vignettes where chemical and linguistic digestions fully begin, and the breaking down of the language reflects the breaking down of culture to its energetic origin. Unlike the ROASTBEEF and MUTTON vignettes, weighted with meaning and argument, these evening vignettes not only dissolve meaning into parts, but they recount history; what begins with American westward expansion reverses to King George's failed containment of the colonies. In DINNER's opening vignette, Stein recounts,

It was a time when in the acres in late there was a wheel that shot a burst of land and needless are niggers and a sample sample set of old eaten butterflies with spoons, all of it to be are fled and measure make it, make it, yet all the one in that we see where shall not it set with a left and more so, yes there add when the longer not it shall the best in the way when all be with when shall not for there with see and chest how for another excellent and excellent and easy easy excellent and easy express e c, all to be nice all to be no so. All to be no so no so. All to be not a white old chat churner. Not to be any example of an edible apple in.

This is an incredibly challenging passage to read; words are seemingly mixed in no logical arrangement and are increasingly incomprehensible as the piece progresses. Or is it? The opening phrase announces storytelling. It suggests a time of America's move west, inspired by the promise of wide or 'white' spaces; farmers left the systematized plantation life, sustained by slavery, suggested with the inclusion of the word 'niggers.' The old eaten butterflies with spoons calls to mind the dreams of yesterday consumed and digested in the colonial east. There is a suggestion of a past story being told and a future to come with the movement between past and future tense. Stein

shifts between *it was, to be, and not to be*. Stein emphasizes change by what *it* will not be: *all to be no so*. Or, all to be not so, not like it was. Also, if we remember to conflate white with write, Stein claims, “All to be not a white old chat churner.” A churner of chat, or story teller is not to be. One thinks of a patriarchal, white old man telling tales of the American expansion, but one also thinks of the patriarchal power of the writer who recounts history in a way that enforces control over the future. This is not how this is to be. This story is not to be an example of the edible apple in, or the Adam and Eve story of apple sin, a story that dictated gender rules and roles for centuries. Stein seems to be asserting that the function of the writer is *not* to enforce such singular, uni-directional thinking on the mind of the reader.

After this past and future tense consideration, the sequence shifts to the active present drawing a distinction between the actions of DINING and EATING. DINING reflects the taming of that frontier as Stein claims, “Dining is west.” Dining is an arrival at the end of America’s expansion. Dining is also social ritual; this suggests establishment. In contrast to this acquisition, EATING is an actual breaking down of language, an act of survival. Stein breaks words into syllables for the first time in the book, another challenge to articulate:

Eat ting, eating a grand old man said roof and never never re soluble burst, not
a near ring not a bewildered neck, or a wildnerness, not really any such bay.

Words are splitting. Where have we landed? The grand old man is eating a wilderness into a non-solvable burst. It is not a *near ring* or an *ear ring* or a be-wildnerness. The landscape, now fully composed, requires breakage between the teeth of the reader, as Stein deliberates its potential future growth or its ultimate stasis:

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 is it so.

If *it* is America, can sound renew the *it* as a new noise to be or is *it* to rest into patterned repetition?

The section continues to break language, and culture down:

Eel us eel us with no no pea no pea cool, no pea cool cooler, no pea cooler with a land a land cost in, with a land cost in stretches.

The p has been broken from the peel, and there is no peal, or sound. Without trimming or sonic release, there is a cooling or falling away. Creative release is diminished as the land has been purchased in stretches or tracts. In contrast, the act of eating this history, or digesting this truth creates heat, as the section continues:

Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating. He heat eating.

Ultimately, this historical digestion ends with, “George is a mass.” One cannot help but think of King George III and his mishandling of England’s colonial masses. It ridicules King George’s physical girth while suggesting that he is a mess. It is through the process of eating that Stein has transferred the reader back through American history, prior to the civil war, to the westward expansion, and to American origins, in the rebellion against King George. George’s amassing mistake brought forth the American Revolution.

This sonic return to origin is also enacted in Stein’s ORANGE sequence. The orange is a distinctly American fruit, and suggests the western-most territory, California. The repeated sections of Orange arrange a diminishing sequence that simplifies language and ultimately, in ORANGE IN, moves to ‘origin’.

ORANGE.

Why is a feel oyster an egg stir. Why is it orange centre. A show at tick and loosen loosen it so to speak sat. It was an extra leaker with a see spoon, it was an extra licker with a see spoon.

ORANGE.

A type oh oh new new not no not knealer knealer of old show beefsteak, neither neither.

ORANGE.

Build is all right.

The first three ORANGES exhibit a diminishment in wordplay that relies on slippage and accumulation. The abstract language also suggests a diminished sexual drive; what begins with sensual words like *egg stir*, and *licker* devolves into old *beefsteak*. By the third repetition, there is no repetition and no energy as the sentence matter-of-factly states that build is all right. Language is reduced to basic addition and communication. By the time the sequence reaches ORANGE IN or origin, intellectual sense has been stripped:

Go lack go lack use to her.
Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.
Whist bottom whist close, whist clothes, woodling.
Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.
Pain soup, suppose it is question, suppose it is butter, real is, real is only, only excreate, only excreate a no since.
A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since.

In the first phrase, one hears ‘go back.’ The food items that follow invoke breakfast foods – cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal. Stein is asserting the need to go back to the beginning, for this is what one prepares for at the end of a culture, day, or dinner. What is real or material is only ex-create, or the aftereffect of creation. And the word, since, is another suggestion of time. Since means prior. Stein is creating a no since – that which is a *now*. This pairing, *no since*, sounds like a nonsense that is a nuisance, as it has to be navigated with no historical bearings. Origin has no sense; it is a sense that is created in the present moment. In order to be more than ex-create, or after creation, one has to return to the beginning to create in the realm of no sense. This also reflects the way revolutionary artwork is perceived by the public, as that which makes no sense to them.

Scene v: Clearing the Table

The FOOD section concludes, like OBJECTS, with a doubling. Stein enacts a rising and falling action, a call for release, and the illustrated consequence of diminishment as she invites the reader to

consider the relationship between parts and the whole. The title itself, SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE, suggests the natural process of covering and accumulation. Artichoke sounds like artist-choke, echoing the peeled pencil of OBJECTS:

SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE.

Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel faces.

SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE.

It was please it was please carriage cup in an ice-cream, in an ice-cream it was too bended with scissors and all this time. A whole is inside a part, a part does go away, a hole is red leaf. No choice was where there was and a second and a second.

In the former vignette, a first-reading sounds like a calling for renewed pleasure: a call to lift the cover and ache *her* in a manner that is new. A red stranger sounds like the mix of the read world with a new turning. A separate reading of this, however, suggests that please, or pleasure, pales hot, the rising action has accumulated and now must fall. That pleasure (has) buttered all the beef-steak and has read the stranger into regular feel or field faces. The second vignette is more abstract; it is written in the past tense; pleasure has faded but has been trimmed away. Stein states that the whole is inside a part. Or a parting. When a part is trimmed away, a hole is in the read (world) that leaves. In other words, the whole is in the leaving. Where *there* was, was a place of no choice. *Now* is a place of emptied newness; *then* is a place of mass accumulation.

In the section's final vignette, A CENTRE IN A TABLE, Stein asks the reader to imagine a sequence of digestion and release. She states,

It was a way a day, this made some sum. Suppose a cod liver, a cod liver is an oil, suppose a cod liver oil is tunny, suppose a cod liver oil tunny is pressed suppose a cod liver oil tunny pressed is china and secret with a bestow a bestow reed, a reed to be a reed to be, in a reed to be.

In a compositional sequence, Stein transports cod liver from the sea to the British dinner table, as the peculiarly British spelling of a word, *centre*, appears for the first time in the collection. As cod

liver oil is used to cure indigestion, Stein then asks the reader to take the medicine and unblock this sum of a day that has been created and stuck in our cultural belly. Tomorrow will then be a *reed to be*, or a read to-be, a promised composition that will have been written and experienced tomorrow. Stein closes the FOOD section with the instruction to “re letter and read her. Read her with her for less.” Re-letter the world and re-letter the reader. Also, there is an implied directive to the reader: Reader, wither for less. Release the world we have read today; read the world anew tomorrow with an emphasis on less.

In the course of this day, Stein has returned American culture to its energetic beginning, not a true beginning, but an extension or moving off from another ending. In this case, it is England, being forced to evolve in creative release of its own invention, the colonies. This consciousness of the cyclic relationship of past and future progress is essential to a culture’s ability to evolve with clear vision. This ability for the reader and writer to re-letter the world, to digest the language of before in service to a revision of language today, is also ensuring clear vision and creative fruitfulness.

ACT III: ROOMS

Why is there.

The reader exits FOOD with the image of the circular table. The center of that table has collected the sum of the day's experience. It is not surprising, then, that the opening mandate in ROOMS is "act so that there is no use in a centre." This repeated use of center with the British spelling again conjures British imperial culture. If *centre* suggests a wholeness and a meaning, then Stein again is stressing the importance of acting in a manner that does not protect that wholeness, or that centralized source of power. British patriarchal class system was on the cusp of decline in late-Edwardian England when Stein composed the poems of *Tender Buttons*. Innovation always faces the counter-force of the resistant, ruling order. The artist and activist must live independently of this force if anything new is to be accomplished. And how does one work outside these constraints? By finding new room or creating new rooms. The structure of Stein's ROOMS is one of flow; in a section that appears to portray rooms, or containers, Stein removes all boundaries and opens the section into a fluid open-ended possibility, a beginning that resists a central claim.

This is not to say there is no central concern in ROOMS. Stein is invested in the spaces between objects, words, and ideas. The foremost preoccupation Stein has in this section is the distinction between *there*, *that*, and *this*. She furnishes the room of the mind with objects only insofar as they distinguish her system of pointing from the traditional system of naming. Pointing is a measurement between things, whereas naming and renaming is a method of claiming and reclaiming. Secondly, Stein furthers her idea of 'what language' that she brings forth in FOOD. And, ultimately, Stein exploits religious vocabulary, drawing distinctions between abstraction and the naming of such

abstraction. Religion is an original source of patriarchal power and is interestingly the very power that drove England to revolt against the Roman Catholic Church.

Once spiritual astonishment leads to religion, it has been named and claimed as something fixed and unchanging. The creation of God is the human mind at its highest abstraction; therefore, religion is reducing such abstraction into a named singularity. In ROOMS, Stein makes her final argument against such static thinking, enacting a way of thinking that continually questions and measures present experience in favor of astonishment and the new.

Scene i: Why is There That This

One of the first images Stein creates in ROOMS is the image of the window. She sets up a distinction between the centre and the window's framed border. She also sets up a distinction between creative process and the product of such a process. She states:

A whole centre and a border make hanging a way of dressing. This which is not why there is a voice is the remains of an offering. There was no rental. So the tune which is there has a little piece to play, and the exercise is all there is of a fast. The tender and true that makes no width to hew is the time that there is question to adopt.

A decorative window curtain is a form of covering or naming of a particular window. But this end-product is merely the remains of the act. It is accumulation. If one thinks of the creative act as that which produces a voice, that voice is also the remains of the offering. Every fresh singing of the tune is exercise and creates movement. Containing the voice, however, creates stasis. Voice is abstract and seems uncontainable, and yet that is what literature is, the remnants of authorial voice.

If one thinks of the window dressing as the text, then the page becomes the 'place' or window of meaning. Stein explains:

If the centre has the place then there is distribution. That is natural. There is a contradiction and naturally returning there comes to be both sides and the centre. That can be seen from the description. The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning. Explaining darkening and expecting relating is all of a piece.

The distance between the centre, or place, and the edges becomes a measurement of *there*. *That*, or authorial pointing, is a natural thing to do. One typically expects authorial pointing to contain meaning. Stein asserts, however, that the author is hidden, while her pointing alone enters the text as meaning. Meaning, however, is the measurement between place and there, or authorial voice and the words on the page. *There* can be any point radiating outward from the centre; thereby containing multiple meanings of *that*. It is in *that* description that these meanings can be interpreted by the reader. For an example, I will return to one of Stein's key claims from FOOD: "what language can instruct any fellow." The dual meanings I previously charted are reflected as they both veer from the centre in two directions: one a question and one a claim.

This layering of possible meanings creates movement, whereas the unilateral pointing of language creates stasis. Stein frequently returns to sequence as a form of harmonious arrangement in ROOMS as she did in FOOD. She illustrates this concretely in the following passage:

A little lingering lion and a Chinese chair, all the handsome cheese which is stone, all of it and a choice, a choice of a blotter. If it is difficult to do it one way there is no place of similar trouble. None. The whole arrangement is established. The end of which is that there is a suggestion, a suggestion that there can be a different whiteness to a wall. This was thought.

Stein is filling a room. It was difficult in creating this arrangement, but as soon as the room is arranged, there is a suggestion; imagination is invoked that sees a new possibility, or a different whiteness to a wall. *Blotter* is a term that means scribbler, stainer, or quencher; this suggests solving a problem quickly or sloppily. Seeing things through in only one way is destructive and not intelligent. It is identifying the new way of doing things that is thoughtful. This occurs by seeing in the present moment. Stein's concrete illustration echoes her earlier exclamation, "The tender and true that makes no width to hew is the time that there is question to adopt." In other words, that which is offered and fixed creates no space for relational measurement. *This* is the time for new questions

and a new compositional arrangement. Consistent rearranging creates succession, or sequence, essential to evolution. Stein claims,

Harmony is so essential. Is there pleasure when there is a passage, there is when every room is open. Every room is open when there are not four, there were there and surely there were four, there were two together. There is no resemblance.

Again, Stein is defining her rooms for what they are not. Rooms are pleasurable when open and not contained by four walls. Room is a noun meaning space; rooms are spaces, but room is also a verb meaning to clear obstructions, to make space. It is a spreading and stretching out that Stein is creating in ROOMS; she has returned to long, flowing sentences that circle themes and ideas without concern for unilateral pointing. Her fluctuation of past tense and present tense is illustrating the ever cyclical ways of rearranging; reflection on prior arrangements, with emphasis on *were* and *was*, is put in contrast with *is* to invoke a means of inspiring fresh composition.

This fresh arrangement often appears ‘monstrous’ to the conservative reader or culture. As Stein claims,

This is a monster and awkward quite awkward and the little design which is flowered which is not strange and yet has visible writing, this is not shown all the time but at once, after that it rests where it is and where it is in place. No change is not needed. That does show design.

This, which is new, is awkward as nobody has experienced it before. After the initial showing, however, the design rests into meaning. Once *this* is assimilated into culture, or digested, it is no longer experienced in present tense; *it* accumulates history and meaning, and change is required. *That*, or authorial pointing, does show the design, or the way *this* has been constructed.

For Stein, such movement of the artist’s eye is essential in being contemporary. As she states in her essay “Picasso,” “a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it.” Being contemporary requires new methods of pointing, not finding new content to name and name anew. Metaphor is a poetry of accumulation. Stein distinguishes her writing from traditional poetry, stating,

The stamp that is not only torn but also fitting is not any symbol. It suggests nothing. A sack that has no opening suggests more and the loss is not commensurate. The season gliding and the torn hangings receiving mending all this shows an example, it shows the force of sacrifice and likeness and disaster and a reason.

Stein is interested in the measurement of accumulation and sacrifice in her writing. The oppositional language between *more* and *loss*, *sacrifice* and *likeness*, *gliding* and *hanging* is a language of relational movement, cause and effect being measured. In contrast, accumulation without loss is smears to single-minded metaphor:

There was a whole collection made. A damp cloth, an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a silent star, a single spark, a little movement and the bed is made. This shows the disorder, it does, it shows more likeness than anything else, it shows the single mind that directs an apple.

There, or the past, has accumulated. *This* shows the disordering of such accumulation. *It*, the product of this, re-pares the world into singular pieces, taking the reader back to origin, via the apple. The apple is perhaps the most commonly identified metaphor of Western culture. By breaking language down Stein breaks stale belief systems down to make room for new ideas. Might the apple become something new if cleaned of historical cultural and poetic references? Stein also plays off of the poetic image of stars and their association with the romantic night sky, asking:

Star-light, what is star-light, star-light is a little light that is not always mentioned with the sun, it is mentioned with the moon and the sun, it is mixed up with the rest of time. Why is the name changed. The name is changed because in the little space there is a tree, in some space there are no trees, in every space there is a hint of more, all this causes the decision.

This star associated with night is also the sun, a metaphor for reason. Why does the name change? The name changes because of the relationship of the object to its surroundings. In contrast to this decisive naming, Stein asserts her belief in the power of what-language. She asks, “why is there so much resignation in a package, why is there rain, all the same the chance has come, there is no bell to ring.” Again, the doubling of meaning is exploited here. The phrase seems to ask why culture becomes resigned to one way of doing things, and why must there be rain, or downturns that upset this arrangement? But, Stein also claims that why creates a re-assignment of a package. Rain creates

movement and change. Why? Because *there*, or then, has lost its power of voice. She repeatedly exploits the use of the term *why* in *Tender Buttons*, letting it function as question and claim, and does this most prevalently in ROOMS. In perhaps the most powerful passage of ROOMS, Stein sings:

Why is a pale white not paler than blue, why is a connection made by a stove, why is the example which is mentioned not shown to be the same, why is there no adjustment between the place and the separate attention. Why is there a choice in gamboling. Why is there no necessary dull stable, why is there a single piece of any color, why is there that sensible silence. Why is there the resistance in a mixture. Why is there no poster, why is there that in the window, why is there no suggester, why is there no window, why is there no oyster closer, why is there a circular diminisher, why is there a bather, why is there no scraper, why is there a dinner, why is there a bell ringer, why is there a duster, why is there a section of a similar resemblance, why is there that scissor.

This passage, on first appearance, seems to be a line of questions. But, upon second look, the paragraph also reads as a definition and positioning of *why*. This passage builds from phrasing of ‘why is’ to ‘why is there’ reinforcing the notion of measurement. In this measurement, Stein echoes many devices employed in *Tender Buttons*. Color is a form of measurement used heavily in OBJECTS along with cleaning devices and scissors. The stove is an agent of change in FOOD along with the bell ringer or pealer. When why is present, change happens. What-language, or the language of questioning, keeps the world open, moving, and active. The final phrase brings why, there, and that together stating, “why is there that scissor.” Questioning is Stein’s version of authorial pointing; it creates the trimming and spreading of experience that change becomes.

Scene ii: Why is There That Religion

The ROOMS section, more so than OBJECTS or FOOD, seems to deal exclusively with language. But as Stein makes clear, what language can instruct any fellow. Language is a guiding force of relationship. By stripping American culture to its roots in the previous section, Stein and the reader are afforded the luxury of abstract meditation on language as a measuring tool that can redirect culture. *Tender Buttons* has carried the reader from the human-object relationship, to human-object processing, and is now considering the relationship between the object of words and human thought

in the abstract space of the mind. It is in the room of the mind that all creation begins. It is not surprising, then, that Stein takes on the subject of religion. As ROOMS streams toward its close, Stein considers religion as singularity in this winding and longwinded sentence:

A religion, almost a religion, any religion, a quintal in religion, a relying and a surface and a service in indecision and a creature and a question and a syllable in answer and more counting and no quarrel and a single scientific statement and no darkness and no question and an earned administration and a single set of sisters and an outline and no blisters and the section seeing yellow and the centre having spelling and no solitude and no quaintness and yet solid quite so solid and the single surface centred and the question in the placard and the singularity, is there a singularity, and the singularity, why is there a question and the singularity why is the surface outrageous, why is it beautiful why is not disturbing a centre no virtue, why is it when it is and why is it when it is and there is no doubt, there is no doubt that the singularity shows.

Here, Stein asserts religion to be a material thing, giving it a mass measurement; quintal means roughly one hundred pounds. A piece of religion takes shape in the form of a service. The odd thing about religious services is that they are a service in indecision, a service of turning toward faith in times of indecision. Religion offers answers for to the mysteries of creation. In contrast to religion is science that disputes notions of religious light and darkness. One imagines the conflict being played out here between science and religion. Is there a God? The answer *no* blisters the religiously faithful. If religion solidifies the meaning of human life on this planet, Stein asks, “why is it beautiful why is not disturbing a centre no virtue?” In other words, disturbing this meaning by asking questions is a virtuous thing to do. When there is no doubt, the world is driven toward singularity that drives toward stasis.

She later claims, “Catholic to be turned is to venture on youth and a section of debate.” Catholic is an adjective that means entire and suggests wholeness; to turn this wholeness is to take a chance on youth and youth’s questioning nature. Catholic also, of course, suggests the Roman Catholic Empire and Church; Stein playfully calls on a rebellion against Catholic principles. To note that such religious principles were/are still a regulating force of sexuality, Stein is suggesting that an overturning of such singular and strict moral codes is essential to liberating a culture’s creative force.

Catholicism is not the only religion invoked in ROOMS. Stein also draws attention to Buddhist tenets. In another one of her suggestive questions, she posits, “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.” In Buddhist belief system, the world contains and will always contain suffering. The source of human suffering is craving. Stein seems to acknowledge here that human questioning, or curiosity, creates craving or desire. Rather than questioning the presence of suffering, however, or the presence of such craving, Stein considers why there is useless suffering. The idea that there is useless suffering suggests that some suffering can be useful. The distinction lies in the presence of why. Man’s questioning nature not only creates desire that creates suffering but also has the power to measure suffering and alleviate it. This measurement allows reflection on suffering; this can lead to evolutionary change. By repeating, “Why is there,” Stein shifts the emphasis from suffering to a means of alleviating such suffering. “Why is there” becomes an answer as well as a question.

The more one questions, the broader the imagination. Stein writes, “A willow and no window, a wide place stranger, a wideness makes an active center.” A tree positions this room outside; no window is needed in the expanse of the world. By seeing the world as something new, the center is activated. Stein’s use of wideness can be easily misread as wildness; one also hears whiteness. This takes the reader back to the goal of the white hunter. Stein is whipping images from the text into sound play as the mind recollects objects freed from their prior associations in the text: *lilac, butter, a spectacle, surprise, a pecking, a petting, a pease, and a cracker...*

The conclusion, then, of ROOMS and *Tender Buttons*, is a sonic orchestration of language and culture’s imperfect construction. In one lush, long sentence, Stein emphasizes the contradictory nature of history and change. Vocabulary draws attention to aging empires, Europe and Asia, to the

changing of the natural world, seasonal shifts and violent water-rising, to varying interpretations of scientific truth confronting religious claims:

A light in the moon the only light is on Sunday. What was the sensible decision. The sensible decision was that notwithstanding many declarations and more music, not even notwithstanding the choice and a torch and a collection, notwithstanding the celebrating hat and a vacation and even more noise than cutting, notwithstanding Europe and Asia and being overbearing, not even notwithstanding an elephant and a strict occasion, not even withstanding more cultivation and some seasoning, not even with drowning and with the ocean being encircling, not even with more likeness and any cloud, not even with terrific sacrifice of pedestrianism and a special resolution, not even more likely to be pleasing.

Stein contrasts the sun's reflection in the moon, a scientific principle, with God's light. The conflict between the mind, science, and the inner senses, religion, is at play here. The sensible decision was *that*, or pointing with the senses, in spite of all the accumulation of the world. The alignment with the object persists, despite all evidence that suggests its breakable nature. But, the state of being *not even* is more likely to be pleasing. Pleasure is in the rise and fall.

Life is flow; and what was will circle back around. It is the ability to digest such breakage and to deliberate history that allows a re-creation, a rebuilding of the now. This, too, will also be carefully imprecise. *Tender Buttons'* final two sentences are a celebration of this human imperfection:

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus and also a fountain.

Such passionate attention to the world as it *is* creates a rising outward; if one thinks again of the table and experience circling a center, inspiration is a rising upward and outward, an expansion of the circle's scope. Asparagus rises from the soil and a fountain rises from the earth; both are orchestrations of man's creative effort. The sexual connotations embedded in these two images reinforce the natural quality of human ecstasy. Sexuality, or creativity, is fertility in action.

POSTSCRIPT

Tender Buttons' aesthetic arc is a transfer from the concrete to the abstract; from the outer world to the world the mind creates. This mirrors a narrative reversal from a read world to an unwritten one. As Stein's content is invested in accumulation and release, an enactment forces the reader to gather Stein's patterns, break them down, and release the multi-directional meanings from the center of the text. This forces an active, rather than passive, engagement with *Tender Buttons*, that invigorates the reader's mind and body.

In his 2011 essay, "The Making of "Tender Buttons,"" Joshua Schuster recounts the history behind the writing and publication of the text. If Gertrude Stein wrote the collections in the reverse order of their presentation: ROOMS, FOOD, and then OBJECTS, it seems significant that she allowed the publication of them in reverse with little challenge. It makes sense to me that they would be composed in this manner. ROOMS reflects an artist searching for new inspiration and a new way of thinking about artistic creation and language. FOOD enacts that analytical impulse to break language and history down to its necessary parts with a return to elementary origin. This allows Stein to flourish in her visual and aural depiction of the now. This fed her vision of the changing world of OBJECTS, a world that was in need of reformation and breakage of the old. The beautiful ordering of the book as it now operates is the regression from the now to origin and inspiration. Stein had to be aware that concluding the text with an upward rush, rather than a downward flush, was a brilliant form of anti-closure. It is in the regression from OBJECTS to FOOD and then ROOMS that the centre is properly digested and divested of its power.

TENDER BUTTONS READING LIST

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