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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *American Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (May, 1973), pp. 228-237

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924449>

Accessed: 17/02/2012 08:12

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# *Gertrude Stein and Picasso: The Language of Surfaces*

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GERTRUDE STEIN saw Pablo Picasso's development in terms of a struggle. This was the struggle with the problem of what is seen, the struggle "not to express the things he did not see, that is to say the things everybody is certain of seeing but which they do not really see."<sup>1</sup>

Picasso, Stein points out, is not like other painters in his use of technique. She sets him off from Courbet, the foremost exponent of photographic realism in painting, and even from Matisse, who is probably the co-founder, with Picasso, of modern art:

One day they asked Matisse if, when he ate a tomato, he saw it as he painted it. No, said Matisse, when I eat it I see it as everybody sees it and it is true from Courbet to Matisse, the painters saw nature as every one sees it and their preoccupation was to express that vision, to do it with more or less tenderness, sentiment, serenity, penetration but to express it as all the world saw it. . . . But Picasso was not like that, when he ate a tomato the tomato was not everybody's tomato, not at all and his effort was not to express in his way the things seen as every one sees them, but to express the thing as he was seeing it.<sup>2</sup>

Stein seems to be saying that these other painters used an avant-garde technique to express, however obliquely, something that could be expressed by *any* technique—namely, the natural world as they and everyone else *thought* they saw it. But Picasso used his unusual technique not to enhance an old vision of reality but to delineate a new one. And what was this vision of reality? Stein tells us:

Really most of the time one sees only a feature of a person with whom one is, the other features are covered by a hat, by the light, by clothes for sport and everybody is accustomed to complete the whole entirely from their knowledge, but Picasso when he saw an eye, the other one

<sup>1</sup> Stein, *Picasso* (Boston, 1959), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

did not exist for him and only the one he saw did exist for him and as a painter. . . . he was right, one sees what one sees, the rest is a reconstruction from memory and painters have nothing to do with reconstruction, nothing to do with memory, they concern themselves only with visible things.<sup>3</sup>

Picasso's vision is instinctively patterned on an epistemology not unlike Hume's—we assume that a profile has another eye because of *memory*—we remember that every time we have observed a one-eyed profile in the past, the person has turned to us and disclosed a second eye. Picasso's "struggle," according to Stein, was with the problem of whether to put faith into pictures. Should he, by suggesting roundness, call upon the viewer's faith in the "other side" of a human body, or should he let pictures be flat painted surfaces to represent natural objects as they really are seen? Picasso was presented with the problem of whether to suggest the existence of a second eye by giving roundness to a face in profile or to paint the profile flat, with the frank confession that this is all we actually see in real life, "everything a human being can know at each moment of his existence and not an assembling of all his experiences."<sup>4</sup>

Having conceived Picasso's struggle along these lines, Stein saw his development as being mainly from cubism to flat surfaces and lines. For cubism hinted at something unseen: namely, the back of the cube, which has to be reconstructed from the viewer's memory of cubes. ("After all one must know more than one sees and one does not see a cube in its entirety."<sup>5</sup>) Picasso finally arrived at what Stein calls "realization" when he began to paint strictly in two dimensions with no hint of a third.<sup>6</sup> Lines became a prominent feature of his art. A two-dimensional concept had replaced the three-dimensional concept of cubes. Faith had been removed from his painting. All that was there was what we really see.

In order to develop this theory of Picasso's evolution from cubism to flat surfaces, it was necessary for Stein to account for the presence of many other trends in Picasso's development which definitely do not amount to any linear evolution of style. After Picasso left cubism, for example, he did not go immediately to flat surfaces but

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

instead entered into a long stylistic period chiefly characterized by *rounded* forms showing Italian influence. Such deviations from the path of true flatness Stein regards as periods of relaxation from the struggle, periods outside the mainstream of Picasso's stylistic development. Of these temporary sidetracks in Picasso's development, Stein remarks,

African art like the other influences which at one time or another diverted Picasso from the way of painting which was his, African art and his French cubist comrades were rather things that consoled Picasso's vision than aided it. . . . They wished to lead Picasso away from his real vision.<sup>7</sup>

After these periods of seduction away from his true course, Stein tells us, Picasso began his struggle again:

Each time that Picasso commenced again he recommenced the struggle to express in a picture the things seen without association but simply as things seen and it is only the things seen that are knowledge for Picasso.<sup>8</sup>

Theoretically, it should be possible to see *all* of Picasso's work as "true Picasso" and not merely as sidetracks. But Stein's selection of important periods is interesting to us because it sheds light on her own work. It is my feeling that this cubist-flatness struggle which Stein saw as being so important to Picasso is present in her own work and is one key to her sometimes puzzling style.

There are, I believe, three things which Stein's style shares with Picasso's: (1) a cubist approach; (2) a style which concentrates on what is seen rather than what is remembered; and (3) a calligraphic or nonsymbolic concept of language. Let us take up these characteristics one at a time.

Stein quickly grasped what there was about cubism<sup>9</sup> that was so

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Several critics (e.g., John Malcolm Brinnin in *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World*, Boston, 1959, or Michael J. Hoffman in *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Philadelphia, 1966) have noted the affinities of Stein's style with cubism. The comparison is usually extended mainly to the supposed jettisoning of subject matter by both Stein and the cubists. That either cubist paintings or Stein's writings *lack* subject matter seems to me to be open to question. A number of critics, of course, have noted obvious connections between Stein's writing and the visual arts in general; Michael J. Hoffman, for example, points out her borrowing of the terms "portrait," "landscape," and

profoundly different from all other art that had gone before it—its sameness from corner to corner, its total lack of a focal point:

The composition of this war, 1914–1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.<sup>10</sup>

Like cubism, Stein's fiction lacks a focal point of action; it lacks a climax. Her stories have a sameness throughout that makes them more portraits than stories. In *Melanctha*, for example, the plot is obviously not meant to hold us. There is no suspense. There are no real surprises. The interest lies in the characters of Melanctha and Jeff. Character is unfolded gradually, and through much repetition (Stein calls it "insistence").<sup>11</sup> Every page is literally as important to the work as every other page, just as every part of a cubist painting is as important as every other part. This technique is a perfect one for presenting what Stein is trying to present: "The theme [of *Three Lives*, which contains *Melanctha*] . . . is an essentially new one: the theme of how little real progress or development there is in most human lives, how much repetition. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Stein's autobiographical writing shows the same lack of focal point: "Nothing is more notable about her autobiographical writings than how, whether she is dealing with her house, her books, her dogs, her pictures, her family, her friends, or even a good meal she has enjoyed, none of these items makes a more salient impression on the page than any other."<sup>13</sup>

"In the three novels written in this generation that are the important things written in this generation," Stein tells us, "there is, in none of them a story. There is none in Proust in *The Making of Americans* or in *Ulysses*." This is the importance of writing portraits instead of stories: "Anybody literally anybody can hear or read everything or anything about anything or everything that happens every

"still life" from the visual arts ("Gertrude Stein's 'Portraits,'" *Twentieth-Century Literature*, XI (Oct., 1965), 115–122).

<sup>10</sup> *Picasso*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Stein, "Portraits and Repetition" in *Lectures in America* (Boston, 1957), pp. 165–206.

<sup>12</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, April 4, 1952, p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

day just as it has happened or is happening on that day. . . . Novels then which tell a story are really then more of the same. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

In her closing description of Picasso's technique, Stein gives a fair description of her own: "[He] understood that a thing without progress is more splendid than a thing which progresses."<sup>15</sup>

We have said that Stein sees Picasso as attempting to express only what is really seen by the eye and not what is interpreted by memory. Stein herself presents only those aspects of an object or a character which present themselves to our five senses. We are told what a person looks like and what he says but seldom what he thinks.

Stein has expressed her own preference for paintings which do not deceive one by their three-dimensional realism but are frankly painted surfaces:

Whether it is intended to look like something and looks like it or whether it is intended to look like something and does not look like it really makes no difference, the fact remains that for me it has achieved an existence in and for itself, it exists on as being an oil painting on a flat surface.<sup>16</sup>

Both Picasso and Stein delineate objects and character according to surfaces. "The souls of people do not interest him," Stein says of Picasso, "that is to say for him the reality of life is in the head, the face and the body. . . ."<sup>17</sup> We cannot say that the souls of people do not interest Stein, for the souls of people are to be found in works like *Three Lives*. But she never shows more of a person's soul than he himself shows through his words and actions. It is not that Stein advocates judging a book by its cover. It is simply that for her the cover itself assumes a particular place of importance. After all, in real life we do not see into people's thoughts; we know a person's soul only from what he says and does. Other authors can be omniscient; Stein prefers to limit her portraiture to exactly what she can really see, in the same way that Picasso limits himself to what is seen and not what is reconstructed from memory. In her portraits, Gertrude Stein, who has so often been labelled subjective, joins Picasso in being *objective* in the profoundest sense of the word.

<sup>14</sup> "Portraits and Repetition" in *Lectures in America* (Boston, 1957), p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> *Picasso*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> "Pictures" in *Lectures in America*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Picasso*, p. 14.

The word "surface" usually has pejorative connotations in criticism: to say that a piece of writing gives surface treatment to a subject is to say that it gives superficial treatment.<sup>18</sup> But Stein has raised the exploration of surfaces to an art, and she admires Picasso in those phases of his career in which he has done the same.

We have seen that in fiction like *Three Lives* Stein uses a style which is objective: it tries to catch the essence of an object or character by delineating its surface characteristics. But there are two Stein styles: a style that can be paraphrased and a style that makes no syntactical sense at all. The paraphrasable style is used in her critical and autobiographical writings and in fiction like *Three Lives*. The unparaphrasable style is used in poems ("Susie Asado," "Preciosilla"), certain plays ("Ladies' Voices," "What Happened"), and certain short portraits (the second "Picasso," the second "Carl Van Vechten," "Jean Cocteau," "Lipschitz," "the Sitwells"). The second style, like the first, has much in common with Picasso's style.

Both Stein and Picasso had to confront the problem of choosing subject matter for artistic treatment. We can see the development of Stein's own theory about subject matter by contrasting it with Hemingway's. Hemingway was certain the subject matter was all-important in art:

I thought about Tolstoi and about what a great advantage an experience of war was to a writer. It was one of the major subjects and certainly one of the hardest to write truly of and those writers who had not seen it were always very jealous and tried to make it seem unimportant, or abnormal, or a disease as a subject, while, really, it was just something quite irreplaceable that they had missed.<sup>19</sup>

Stein, on the other hand, repeatedly emphasizes the importance of divorcing oneself from one's own memories and experiences. (See *What are Masterpieces, My Little Dog Knows Me, I Am An American but Paris is My Home Town*.) What she evidently is getting at is that if one has some really great experience in one's past, such

<sup>18</sup> This is precisely George T. Wright's objection to Stein's writing: "Wherever the art of Gertrude Stein is basically comic, an art that skips over surfaces and laughs at people's vanities, the attitude does her art good. But whenever in her later work she tries to probe the deeper feelings, wherever she essays an art of tragedy or pathos, her view of human suffering is too restricted" ("Gertrude Stein and Her Ethic of Self-Containment," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, VIII, 1963, 22).

<sup>19</sup> Hemingway, *The Green Hills of Africa*.

as fighting in a war, one becomes so engrossed with the memory of this experience that one is forced to choose it for subject matter. Stein wants complete freedom in the choice of subject matter, even to the point of choosing not to have subject matter in a work at all. To Stein subject matter is only of secondary importance:

There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the subject of anything. . . . A picture exists for and in itself and the painter has to use objects landscapes and people as a way the only way that he is able to get the picture to exist. . . . Just now . . . every one who writes or paints has gotten to be abnormally conscious of the things he uses that is the events the people the objects and the landscapes . . . .<sup>20</sup>

What Stein affirms is not subject matter but style—the choice of words: “They [Elizabethan writers] did not care so much about what they said although they knew that what they said meant a great deal but they liked the words, and one word and another word next to the other word was always being chosen.”<sup>21</sup>

The denial of the importance of subject matter, of course, can lead to extremes of aestheticism that are not acceptable to some of the most style-conscious critics. Stein’s second style, the “unparaphrasable style,” represents such an extreme. She apparently arrived at this extreme first through the habit of considering subject matter unimportant, and second through the habit of regarding language as calligraphy.

This second habit is another manifestation of the technique of surfaces. One who is interested in presenting flat surfaces of objects in art or literature, as both Stein and Picasso were, would certainly not be expected to make any use of symbols, for symbols suggest something beyond the immediately perceived fact. Language is symbol; the word “apple” is a symbol for the object “apple.” Because Stein and Picasso were interested in flat surfaces stripped of any hidden meaning, both came to view words as things in themselves, denying the objects for which the words traditionally stood symbol. Picasso, for example, began to use the Russian alphabet decoratively in his pictures. He also painted one picture called “Deux Femmes Calligraphiées” using calligraphic techniques, in which Stein rejoiced. “In the Orient calligraphy and the art of painting and

<sup>20</sup> Stein, *What Are Masterpieces* (Los Angeles, 1940), pp. 85–86.

<sup>21</sup> “What is English Literature,” in *Lectures in America*, p. 30.



sculpture have always been very nearly related," Stein explains. "In China the letters were something in themselves. . . . For Picasso, a Spaniard, the art of writing, that is to say calligraphy, is an art."<sup>22</sup> Later Stein comments further on the calligraphic quality of Picasso's work during one phase of his career:

In all this period of 1913 to 1917 one sees that he took great pleasure in decorating his pictures, always with a rather calligraphic tendency than a sculptural one.

. . . . .

From 1914 to 1917 cubism changed to rather flat surfaces, it was no longer sculpture, it was writing and Picasso really expressed himself in this way because it was not possible, really not, to really write with sculpture, no, not.<sup>23</sup>

Stein herself also came to regard words as things in themselves. She enjoyed not the meaning of a word but the way it sounded; not the meaning of a line but the look of a printed line on the page. For example, she objected to the use of question marks, exclamation marks, and quotation marks because "they are ugly, they spoil the line of the writing or the printing."<sup>24</sup> To Stein, these markings on the page were of value not as symbols for objects but as decorations: "The question mark is alright when it is all alone when it is used as a brand on cattle or when it could be used in decoration," she tells us, "but connected with writing it is completely entirely completely uninteresting."<sup>25</sup>

As for using words as pure sound, Stein herself gives us an account of how she fell away from meaning:

I found that I was for a little while very much taken with the beauty of the sounds as they came from me as I made them.

This is a thing that may be at any time a temptation. . . .

This melody for a little while after rather got the better of me and it was at that time that I wrote these portraits of which I have just spoken, the second Picasso, the second Carl Van Vechten, the Jean Cocteau,

<sup>22</sup> *Picasso*, pp. 33-34. W. H. Gass's article "Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language" (*Accent*, XVIII, Aug., 1958, 233-244) contains remarks on Stein's interest in calligraphy.

<sup>23</sup> *Picasso*, pp. 37, 39.

<sup>24</sup> "Poetry and Grammar," in *Lectures in America*, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Lipschitz, the Sitwells, Edith Sitwell, Joe Davidson, quantities of portraits.<sup>26</sup>

Stein has done two short portraits of Picasso in addition to her long essay on him.<sup>27</sup> The first is in her more traditional style—it catches the essence of Picasso directly through such statements as, “He always did have something having meaning that did come out of him.”<sup>28</sup> The second is what we might call nonrepresentational art, with all its glorying in the sound of long *o*'s and the pleasing calligraphic sight of many *s*'s.

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

Would he like it if Napoleon would Napoleon would he like it.

Shutters shut and shutters and so shutters shut and shutters and so and so. . . .

One can imagine that Stein would have loved to engrave this poem, as Blake did his poems. It is not a description of Picasso but a tribute to him, written out of stylistic assumptions that she at that time shared with him.

Picasso himself did only an occasional painting which was totally divorced from objects in the natural world. He did not long dally with nonrepresentational art, and neither did Gertrude Stein. Both moved back into the real world of objects. Stein describes her return: “I did begin to think that I was rather drunk with what I had done, and I am always one to prefer being sober.”<sup>29</sup> Later she tells us what she learned: “Melody should always be a by-product it should never be an end in itself should not be a thing by which you live if you really and truly are one who is to do anything and so as I say I very exactly began again.”<sup>30</sup> And what was it that she began again to do? “To get back to the essence of the thing contained within itself.”<sup>31</sup>

And in the end it was her creation of the thing contained within

<sup>26</sup> “Portraits and Repetition,” in *Lectures in America*, pp. 196–197.

<sup>27</sup> Stein, “Picasso,” in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York, 1945), p. 335.

<sup>28</sup> The longer portrait is discussed briefly by Richard Bridgman on pp. 118–119 of his definitive work *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York, 1970). Bridgman's book in general is invaluable as background material but he makes no extended comparison between the aesthetic theories of Stein and Picasso.

<sup>29</sup> “Portraits and Repetition,” in *Lectures in America*, pp. 197–198.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> “Portraits and Repetition,” in *Lectures in America*, p. 199.

itself for which we remember her. Her brilliant surfaces will shine long after her calligraphy has been forgotten. Critics who admire her representational style often feel that her nonrepresentational style was a tragic waste of talent. Ben Reid is typical: "It is sad," he notes, "that Miss Stein could not have reconciled herself to the only language in which she can speak to us."<sup>32</sup> To a comment like this, Stein might have answered with reference to Picasso:

Picasso said to me once with a good deal of bitterness, they say I can draw better than Raphael and probably they are right, perhaps I do draw better but if I can draw as well as Raphael I have at least the right to choose my way and they should recognise it, that right, but no, they say no.

I was alone at this time in understanding him, perhaps because I was expressing the same thing in literature. . . .<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps we are not ready to recognize the importance of the innovator, even when his work sometimes falls short of art:

Picasso said once that he who created a thing is forced to make it ugly. In the effort to create the intensity and the struggle to create this intensity, the result always produces a certain ugliness, those who follow can make of this thing a beautiful thing because they know what they are doing, the thing having already been invented.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps someday Stein will have followers who will make a more beautiful thing out of what she began.

<sup>32</sup> Reid, "Gertrude Stein's Critics," *University of Kansas City Review*, XIX (Winter, 1953), 121-130.

<sup>33</sup> *Picasso*, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.