



Tender Buttons

Gertrude Stein

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Tender Buttons is the best known of Gertrude Stein's "hermetic" works. It is a small book separated into three sections - Food, Objects and Rooms each containing prose under subtitles. (Kellner, 1988, p. 61-62). Its publication in 1914 caused a great dispute between Mabel Dodge Luhan and Gertrude, because Mabel had been working to have it published by another publisher. (Mellow, 1974, p. 178). Mabel wrote at length about the bad choice of publishing it with the press Gertrude selected. (Ibid.) Evans wrote Gertrude:

Claire Marie Press ... is absolutely third rate, & in bad odor here, being called for the most part 'decadent' and Broadwayish and that sort of thing. . . . I think it would be a pity to publish with [Claire Marie Press] if it will emphasize the idea in the opinion of the public, that there is something degenerate & effete & decadent about the whole of the cubist movement which they all connect you with, because, hang it all, as long as they don't understand a thing they think all sorts of things. My feeling in this is quite strong.

(Ibid.) Stein ignored Mabel's exhortations, and eventually Mabel, and published 1,000 copies of the book, in 1914. (An antiquarian copy was valued at over \$1,200 in 2007). It is currently in print.

Stein's poems in Tender Buttons are very stylised and hermetic, as she preferred for sound rather than sense.

Tender Buttons Details

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From Reader Review Tender Buttons for online ebook

Jennifer says

Sexy. But just read this for fun. This is a book that literature classes can't deal with--and will make literature classes something you can't deal with.

Deena says

Some call it nonsense, but if you derive pleasure from reading these vignettes, you can't understand how someone else doesn't.

Here's how I see it: When we were learning our language, we learned how to link the word with the object the word represents. Gertrude Stein seeks to dismantle this link and consequently abstract our common understanding of language. While we learned to easily state, "this equals that," we should not simply place an equal sign between the descriptive word and the actual object described. It is in fact more accurate to state, "this is parallel to that." And though parallel lines may be infinitely in sync, there will always exist a gap. Likewise, the object in the material world and the word representing it are two autonomous entities. Stein works with this gap between word and object, not to evaluate it, but to explore it. Gertrude Stein finds loopholes in the defining social and prescriptive grammatical rules as well as the sounds of our language to make a text that bounces between nonsense play and thoughtful deliberation.

A great source of inspiration for me personally.

J.G. Keely says

Mostly a collection of self-pleasuring on the topic of difference for its own sake. Some ear there for sound and concept, but mostly ringing as an overbearing attempt to be new. Stein's hatred of punctuation strikes one as an affectation, but then so do most of her opinions or ideas. I suppose Hemingway's sense that she was 'always right' stemmed from the lacking of his imagination (beyond that which bolstered his sense of self, and perhaps in that their true connection). Stein's importance to literary and artistic movements seems less creative and more like that of the town itself: that she happened to be a locale.

Vincent Scarpa says

"A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake."

Daniel Lomax says

"It was a garden and belows belows straight. It was a pea, a pea pour it in its not a succession, not it a simple, not it a so election, election with."

Gertrude Stein's aim in writing *Tender Buttons* was, in some sense, to reinvent the English language, and the foreword explains that "the reader is forced to question the meanings of words, to become reacquainted with a language that Stein thought had become dulled by long use". In this sense her project is the literary counterpart of Stravinsky's twelve-tone composition, a deliberate effort to break away from unnecessary constraints on the language of music, which themselves constrain the way we think.

The problem is that, in an overzealous attempt to emancipate the language, she exiles it. What appears in *Tender Buttons* is not really language, because it doesn't really *mean* anything. James Joyce's later works may be incredibly difficult to understand, but at least there is something to be understood.

For a comparison, it might help to look to Don van Vliet, otherwise known as Captain Beefheart. He would often paint in black, white and grey, so that (he explained) your imagination could fill out the colours for itself. But this is exactly the opposite of what Gertrude Stein does: she provides the vocabulary - the colours, if you like - and leaves you to make something of it, to form it into shapes. One might as well put a dictionary through a blender.

This isn't just a matter of style over substance. The two are inextricable. The style is the manner in which you deliver the substance, and if there is no substance I really don't think I can say anything of the style. Stein wanted to sound lyrical, but again the way language looks and sounds derives from what it means. Have you ever overheard two people fluently speaking a foreign language on the bus, and it sounds like there are no gaps between the words? That's because there aren't. There aren't when other English people speak either: your brain inserts them for you. Everything about the way language looks, sounds, *feels*, can't be entirely pulled apart from what it *means*.

And I defy you to read bits like this...

"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."

...without glazing over. It's a crap, a crap, crap a, a book, crap book, a crap book, it's crap.

As such, Gertrude Stein's idea is more interesting than her book, the theory better than what it entails. Or as Voltaire wrote to Rousseau: "Never was such a cleverness used in the design of making us all stupid".

Aileen says

tender: one who tends or waits upon
one who attends or has charge of
a ship or boat used to attend to a larger ship or boat in various capacities
an act of tendering
an offer of money in exchange for goods or services

an offer of anything for acceptance
an offer made in writing by one party to another to execute an order for the supply or purchase of goods or
for the execution of work
currency prescribed by law
literal and physical senses
soft or delicate in texture
of the ground, soft with moisture, rotten
frail, fine, thin, slender
to offer or present formally for acceptance
to present for approval or acceptance, to proffer
to become tender, to soften
to render gentle
to mitigate
to ship on board a tender

buttons: small knob for decoration or use
a type of anything of small value
playfully used

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Gertrude Stein drops acid and describes items from domestic life using language generally reserved for Georgia O'Keeffe paintings. I frequently found myself getting impatient with it in that itchy skin sort of way where I just wanted it to be over, while at other times it felt like I was having a lovely swim in a sea of Stein's sensory perceptions. In short, I'm ambivalent. Here and there, it seemed to border on saying that heterosexual intercourse is sterile and/or inherently violent (without outright saying it, of course), and that's definitely an annoying enough notion all by itself. Or maybe I am reading too much into it in that regard? Whatever the case may be, I think it's pretty important to consider where your head is at while reading *Tender Buttons*, as it can have an unfair influence either way. I guess I've been feeling more concrete and less "stream-of-conscious-ee" lately, and so wasn't in the open, fragmented, airy frame of mind necessary to take this thing on. This is one to be reread and reconsidered at a later date.

The Broadcast album is definitely way, WAY better, though. Of that much I am certain.

Bleh. Review fail. Moving on, then...

Madeline says

"A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading."

...okay.

Gertrude Stein was once quoted as saying that Ernest Hemingway was "all bullfights and bullshit."

That may be true, but *you*, madam, are just bullshit. At least Hemingway threw some bullfighting in every now and then.

Read for: Modern Poetry

Mat says

This reads like a cut-up, that is to say that the words, the words, words and the, have been scrambled or reassembled to create striking instances of imagery juxtaposed in surprising and exciting ways and highly original and fascinating collocations as a result.

This is a book to be appreciated in terms of its wordplay and harmonics rather than in terms of any strict notion of meaning. Just like in cubism, new and incongruous images and ideas are placed alongside more contiguous ones.

If you are unfamiliar with Stein, this is definitely not a good diving-off spot so instead start with her more 'conventional' works such as *Three Lives* or even better the terrific *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (see my review on that for more information).

Brendan says

"Experimental" but also funny and sexy. Its like pages covered in little droplets of word rain.

Joe says

Why did it take me so long to read this? Dumb dumb dumb. It seems impossible to think about latest manifestations of insistence on new kinds of sentences, genrelessness, etc without starting with Stein as the modernist G-mother.

Wondering about the use of "is," assertion of total exchangeability of objects and sensation in the heart of the Western domestic space. Invites one to see every object as a commodity in an economy of universal exchange? And/or every word as changeable in an economy of English? Or an opening up of, destabilization of stalwart domestic spaces, providing strange grips on, unexpected connections to other things--fields, churches, taxes, care, mud, water--upsetting the locations and relations of things?

Or just great and pretty fun getting back to the texture of language? Hooray for first book of 2011.

Paolo says

My copy of this book is permanently tucked into my messenger bag. I carry it everywhere I travel--in the city, outside of the country--and is one of those rare books that actually inspires me to write each time I open to any one of its pages. I love this most tender of buttons, in spite of the occasional racist phrase inside it. "Act as if there is no use in a centre"? Gertrude Stein 4-ever.

Count No Count says

If I find myself long on sleep and short on hallucinations I open this little paperback and wait for the words to start pushing crazy around in my brain. Once thoroughly confused, I close the book, satisfied.

amanda says

i really have no idea what the point of this was and what was being talked about and i'm just SO GLAD that i have a 30 minute presentation on it in two days :)))

Jeff says

Sugar is not a vegetable.

In a bit of a reading funk, not sure what to dip into next, finding all my crossword puzzle books filled out, last night i went back to this small handful of electrons on my Kindle. It has sat there for god knows how many dogs' years. I've loved the title ever since i first heard it, probably in 1989 or '90, but never read it.

Stein got (through) to me. You, however, might feel her pushing you away. I don't know why it words so well for me, maybe because i dabbled in this form of drivel when i was just a dogle.

Also it's National Poultry Month so maybe i read it only because of being an impressionable mind. (for example, we had pizza last night because 2 of the many episodes of *The Office* that i binged yesterday included pizza parties)

Maybe i read this book because yesterday i stumbled across an old file on my computer that contained some poultries (including the one below) that i was sharing (only with my not-yet-wife and my always-mother).

time is dream music boiling down
the honey lust of girls to visions of rain
cooking spring like motherblood

As i pasted it into this "review", i wanted to change motherblood to motherhood but even moreso i wanna know whether there's a mysoginism lurking between honey lust of girls and motherblood. Just as i wonder about the racism in/between Stein's use of The N Word and Chinamen (exactly once each).

So there are other dangers besides feeling alienated by Stein's obscurities. For the moment i'm choosing to enjoy the sounds and rhythms of many many passages more than i endured the fewer duller sections.

Kenny says

This is kind of the literary equivalent of the guy who takes a shit and gets it put into a museum as sculpture, sneezes onto a canvass, etc. I can see the argument that it's "profound" in its implied questioning of "what really is art" but is there a future in it? Does anybody enjoy it?

Well, judging from the reviews, some people do. I don't, but usually when I don't like something I at least have a clue as to why other people do. With Stein, I mean, it's nonsense, not the Lewis Carroll kind, but really just words thrown together at random. What are the "pleasures" of such a text? The musicality of the words is still there, I get that (big fan of the Ursonate). Maybe I was just so trapped in my normal mode of reading for content that I missed the beauty of the sounds. Honestly, though, I'm not in love with the sounds of conversational English words thrown together willy-nilly; I'd rather listen to someone speaking German for the sound of the words.

Joseph says

Just when I begin to understand poetry, I run across a book like this. I did win it in a Goodreads giveaway from City Lights Books, so I did volunteer for it.

This is not your typical poetry. It is not Wordsworth, it's not Rimbaud, it's not even Ginsberg. If it comes close to someone's writing, I would have to say Burroughs. There is a disconnection within the work. The poetry is in paragraph form and structured much like Naked Lunch's* cut-up style. In Stein's cut-up style, common words are joined together. For example, the title tender and buttons, two common words have little in common with each other but seem to fit well together. She also uses the phrase "piece of coffee." It sounds very wrong, but somehow works well.

Stein was influenced by the Cubist artists who dissected what they saw and rearranged the pieces in a different order. Below is Braque's Violin and Candle Stick

The violin and the candlestick are visible in the picture, but not in the way we are used to seeing them. Stein does the same with her words, grammar, and structure. It is all there, but not in the expected manner.

The poem "Apple" allowed me to see what was being done and acted as a Rosetta Stone for interpretation of many of the poems. Others seemed to take some thinking. The poem "Dining" consists of one line

Dining is west

I have no idea if my thinking is right, but it went something like:

Dining = dinner

dinner = evening

evening = sunset

sunset = west

However the equally simple "Salad"

It is a winning cake

left me clueless.

The poems are short one line items, like above, to several pages for the poem "Roast Beef" the poems however, seem to have little to do with the title. Most poems, however, fit on a single page. I am not sure what to make of this collection. My mind tries to find a code or a pattern in the work and there probably is not one. In the notes and afterword several theories are discussed from a hidden code to Stein being stoned. I can see where the latter might come from, but I doubt it. I am placing my amateurish opinion her work as an experiment. There are enough similarities in her work and Cubism to make that case. This edition also includes copies of Stein handwritten corrections to the first publication.

Tender Buttons is worth the read for the open minded and those readers who do not see the need for strict form, grammar, or style...to the extreme. This collection is a mind bender, but one I will be keeping and reading again and again, waiting for that magic moment when it all makes perfect sense.

*In verifying my information on *Naked Lunch*, I learned that it was rejected by City Lights Books.

Jenna says

I echo Stein's sentiments: "All this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain" (Stein 52).

Powells.com says

Stein continues her experiments with a "continuous present" in this classic work written in 1912, emphasizing sounds, rhythms, and repetitions over and against "sense." To live in this state is "to begin again and again," to "use everything." She sums it up best: "The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful." Recommended by Jack, Powells.com

Buck says

Hope in gates, hope in spoons, hope in doors, hope in tables, no hope in daintiness and determination. Hope in dates.

Okay, besides the semaphored helplessness of a giant 'WTF', what would be the correct response to these lines, and to *Tender Buttons* as a whole? Don't look at me. I have no idea what any of this means, or whether it means anything at all. Maybe this prose poem is just a gourmet word salad, maybe it's just a series of non-sequiturs to which I've foolishly assented. I don't know. I don't care. I love it. It's magnificent. I love it.

I'm not ashamed to admit that, by the last page, *Tender Buttons* had me on my feet, declaiming, actually declaiming its thrilling nonsense to an empty apartment, in impassioned tones and with theatrical gestures, my bathrobe flying open in my enthusiasm.

This is gonna sound like a big helping of crazy, but I choose to read *Tender Buttons* as wisdom literature. Seriously. From Heraclitus to Jesus to Yoda, all the great teachers have spoken in riddles, paradoxes, weird-ass aphorisms. And Stein has the whole gnomic oracle thing down pat:

There is no gratitude in mercy and medicine.

Perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving.

If the party is small a clever song is in order.

The sudden spoon is the wound in the decision.

Kindness is not earnest, it is not assiduous it is not revered.

Surprise, the only surprise has one occasion.

A curving example makes righteous fingernails.

I'm not quite insane enough to try and live by these precepts, but I am just insane enough to think there might be something in them, something very odd and possibly schizophrenic, but still worth listening to. Stein was a shrewd old bird, I tell you. If she went to the trouble of inventing a bizarre idiolect in which to encipher her wisdom, well, I'll give her the benefit of the doubt: she must have had her reasons. But, as I say, I love this stuff, so maybe I'm just casting about for ways to justify my love (to quote another shrewd old bird).

Now sit down, Buck, and do up your bathrobe.
