

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

What is a Sentence: Gertrude Stein and Sentence Theory

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis contrasts the normative sentence in conventional writing with Gertrude Stein's idiosyncratic use of the sentence as a compositional unit in her experimental writing. In Gertrude Stein's writing, the sentence is both an object of interrogation and the site of Stein's resistance to the conventions of literary language. The normative sentence is an authoritative, hegemonic construction that implicates and propagates the patriarchal structure of language. Gertrude Stein struggles with the sentence, in her attempts to define the sentence and in her revaluation of sentence structure and notation. Locating her opposition to petrified language usage in sentence structure, Stein revitalizes her language through her subversion of normative grammar and reclaims the sentence as an active, generative form.

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## Introduction

Never ask any one what a sentence is or what it has been.<sup>1</sup>

- Gertrude Stein

Despite Gertrude Stein's warning not to inquire into the nature of the sentence, this thesis determines that such an inquiry constitutes a valuable approach to reading Stein's work. The sentence is of paramount importance in Stein's body of writing, both as a compositional unit and as an object of study. Gertrude Stein did not write texts: she composed sentences. Successions of sentences create texts that Stein classifies according to genre, but which seldom conform to the conventions of particular genres. In all her writing, the compositional energy rests at the level of the sentence.

Stein's project, to the extent that it can be summarized, consisted in evaluating and destabilizing the complacent use of language that she identified in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She perceived that literary language had become codified and petrified in received structures that lacked immediacy and vitality. She writes that, in her famous line "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," the rose is red for the first time in a hundred

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<sup>1</sup> *How to Write* 33

years of English poetry (*LMN* 7). The word “rose” regains its force through the insistence of repetition, through an emphasis on the materiality of the word, and through the use of non-normative sentence structure. In order to revitalize language, Stein insisted that it was necessary to render visible the accepted and transparent methods of organizing language: genre, tropes, grammar, and most significantly, the sentence. By composing sentences that question the authority of the proper, complete model of the sentence, Stein interrogates the authority of normative grammar and conventional prose.

Much of the prior criticism on Gertrude Stein focuses on interpretation: the identification of political or philosophical themes in her texts, the study of Stein’s genre distinctions, the application of interpretive analogies from other aesthetic and scientific fields to Stein’s texts (i.e. cubism, Jungian philosophy, aphasia, automatic writing). What these studies fail to recognize is the importance of method in Stein’s works. What she wrote is less significant than how she wrote it. For Stein, the process of writing takes precedence over the product of writing. It is more appropriate, and more fruitful, to approach Stein’s texts through an emphasis on the mechanics of writing, rather than on the abstractions of theme, genre or aesthetic influences.

Mariane DeKoven examines the process of Stein’s writing as well as her methods of “violating and reshaping” (xiii) the conventions of language. She distinguishes between conventional modes of writing and experimental writing,

the tradition of cultural resistance in which she locates Stein's project.

Conventional writing is, according to DeKoven, logocentric, linear, closed, and patriarchal. It is receptive to interpretive readings, because it can be summarized according to theme. Experimental writing, in contrast, is pluridimensional, irreducible, and open. It cannot be reduced to a "thematic synthesis" (DeKoven 6), because its emphasis is not on meaning or representation, but rather on sound, rhythm, and the materiality of the signifier. DeKoven writes that experimental writing is anti-patriarchal because it enacts an implicit or explicit resistance to the patriarchal hegemony of conventional writing.<sup>2</sup> This thesis examines Stein's resistance to the normative grammar of conventional writing, and determines that the site of Stein's resistance is the sentence.

It would be valuable to formulate a comprehensive definition of the sentence against which to juxtapose Gertrude Stein's subversion of normative sentence structures. At this point, the wisdom of Stein's warning becomes apparent. Ron Silliman writes, "There is, in the domain of linguistics, philosophy and literary criticism, no adequate consensus at (sic) to the definition of the sentence" (63). The most famous conception of the sentence is that it represents or expresses a complete thought. This view originated with Dionysus Thrax in the second century BC and persists to the contemporary moment (Ivic 20). Without delving into the field of epistemology, or attempting the nebulous task



of defining thought, the limitations of this view are apparent. Thought is a psychological phenomenon, while the sentence is a grammatical construct. Although it is possible to determine the grammatical or notational completeness of a given sentence, it is impossible to divide the continuous stream of thought into units of completion.

A contemporary of Thrax, Aristotle defined the sentence as a combination of elements that has a definite, independent meaning, in which each of the parts has an independent meaning also (Ivic 18). Although this is a valid statement about the sentence, it does not adequately define sentence, because it does not distinguish sentence from phrase, clause, paragraph, or any other textual unit that is composed of smaller units. The structuralist definition of the sentence is “a linguistic form which is not in a construction with any other linguistic form” (Ivic 161). This definition regards the sentence as the limit of syntactic integration, but disregards the integration of sentences into paragraphs. Similarly, a linguistics textbook defines the sentence as the “largest unit of syntactic analysis,” ignoring the possibility of syntactic integration beyond the boundaries of the sentence (Dobrovolsky 163). These definitions focus on the operation of syntactic integration up to the level of the sentence, without addressing the issue of sentence notation, or examining how a sentence operates within a text.

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<sup>2</sup> DeKoven elaborates her conceptions of conventional writing and experimental writing in the

While linguistics emphasizes form, philosophy emphasizes meaning. The sentence is equated with the more specific terms, proposition and statement, and its utility is judged in terms of logical veracity. Prescriptive grammar determines that the sentence is a completed form, containing subject and predicate, organized by logical exposition, that communicates a predetermined meaning.

Ron Silliman, in "The New Sentence," examines the operation of sentences in prose poetry and determines that the sentence is a unit of measure, in which the qualities associated with the line break in lined poetry (torque, ambiguity, stress) are interiorized in sentence grammar. He writes that within the context of prose poetry, the sentence is a unit of rhythm.

The term "sentence" has no universal meaning. Rather, its meaning shifts according to the context in which it is used: linguistics, philosophy, prescriptive grammar, or literary criticism. In each context, however, sentence is a unit. What the term "sentence" signifies in each context depends on what it is perceived to be a unit of. Sentence can be a unit of logic, communication, exposition, completion, measure, or rhythm. Wittgenstein perceives that the term sentence has no absolute value when he writes, "Look at the sentence as an instrument, and at its sense as its employment" (126).

In her experimental writing, Gertrude Stein does not employ the sentence as a unit of communication, logic or exposition. She disregards grammatical

completion in the formulation of her sentences – phrases, clauses, and agrammatical constructs are visually and notationally equivalent to normative sentences in her texts. She does not employ the sentence as a vehicle for representation; her sentences do not represent preconceived meanings. Her sentences are generative and active, registering the process of writing. Stein writes that a sentence “exists in and for itself” (*Narration* 18): she refuses prescriptive conditions on the formation of sentences and criteria for the evaluation of the utility of sentences. Sentence in Stein’s writing is a unit of nothing other than sentence.

In Chapter One, “*The Sentence*,” I outline received ideas about the sentence, arguing that the normative sentence is an authoritative construct that invites resistance, particularly from writers of experimental texts. The two criteria of the normative sentence are grammatical completeness and grammatical acceptability: the normative sentence comprises a subject and a predicate, and conforms to accepted conventions of language usage. These criteria ensure that the sentence functions as a unit of logic and communication and contributes to discourse. In this chapter, I also argue that the sentence belongs solely to writing, not to speech. Because the sentence is written, it lacks the immediacy of speech, an immediacy that Gertrude Stein recuperates into her writing. I offer two examples of resistance to normative grammar: John Ashbery’s poem “*The System*,” which conforms to the convention of

grammatical completeness but frustrates communication and discursivity; and Gertrude Stein's use of non-normative syntax to create ambiguity and immediacy.

Chapter Two, "Gertrude Stein and the Sentence," examines Stein's comments about sentences in her texts *How to Write*, *Lectures in America*, and *Narration*, and attempts to formulate Stein's sentence theory. Focusing on "Sentences," the longest section of *How to Write*, I discuss the problems of reading the text presents, because it employs the strategies of poetry and of expository or critical writing, without adhering unproblematically to either category. I attempt to delineate Stein's strategies of subversion of normative sentence grammar, and I discuss the convention of punctuation in normative prose and compare Stein's discussion of punctuation in "Poetry and Grammar" with her use of punctuation in *Tender Buttons*. I compare Stein's distinction between sentences and paragraphs as she explains it in *Narration* to Karen Mac Cormack's sentences in her book *Quirks & Quillets*.

Chapter Three, "The Steinian Sentence," affirms the centrality of the sentence as a unit of composition in Stein's writing. I argue that a formal approach to Stein's texts is more viable than a thematic approach. Noting that Stein's sentences invite imitation from writers who admire her as well as from writers whose intent is to mock her, I discuss the distinctive Steinian style in the context of a comparison of sentence structures in a variety of Stein's shorter texts.

This chapter examines the qualities of sentence structure that Stein employs throughout her body of work, qualities that constitute an archetypal Steinian sentence.

Gertrude Stein perceived that the sentence not only organizes language, but also controls and represses language. She wrote sentences that subvert and undermine conventional grammar in order to revitalize language and release language from the petrified conventions of literary discourse. Determining that a focus on the sentence as a compositional unit constitutes a viable approach to Stein's experimental writing, this thesis examines her strategies of sentence subversion as well as her conceptions of the sentence.

## ***The Sentence***

### **1. Grammatical Completeness and Acceptability**

A sentence is a judgment passed on a transgressor of law to prevent further transgression: its function is to restore order. The grammatical construction that is the written sentence also propagates an ideology of order. The sentence orders thought and language into logical structures. It subsumes the sprawling body of language into a hierarchically structured unit that acts as a vehicle for meaning. The sentence connotes authority and mastery; the sentence is the construction through which the hegemonic operations of grammar invest control on the undeterminability and infinite possibilities inherent in language. Steve McCaffery writes, "Grammar is a repressive mechanism designed to regulate the free flow of language," operating through "hierarchy, subordination and postponement" (*North of Intention* 98). The ideal sentence is transparent; it effaces the grammatical operations of its structure in order to emphasize its exchange value as a communicative device.

Normative sentences fulfill two criteria: they are grammatically complete and grammatically acceptable. The view that each sentence is a complete proposition requires that each sentence comprise two parts – a subject and a predicate – with every element contributing to either part. Edward Sapir offers the following definition of the sentence:

It is the linguistic expression of a proposition. It combines a subject of discourse with a statement in regard to this subject. ... each or either may be so qualified as to lead to complex propositions of many sorts. No matter how many of these qualifying elements (words or functional parts of words) are introduced, the sentence does not lose its feeling of unity so long as each and every one of them falls into place as contributory to the definition of either the subject of discourse or the core of the predicate.

(36)

Each sentence is a bipartite, or binary, structure (Potter 91). Without one of the two components of the binary, the sentence does not fulfill its teleology of communication. Grammatical completion ensures that the sentence has a use value and an exchange value: the grammatically complete sentence carries meaning and contributes to discourse.

The ability to form sentences is not inherent, but learned from familiarity and tradition. Simeon Potter writes that "we repeat sentences from memory and we vary them by analogy" (90). Acceptable sentence structures are those accepted by the community of language users and the sentences we speak or write conform to these structures. Potter remarks that an infinite variety of sentences can be formed from these general archetypes but warns that a speaker or writer must not stray too far from familiar sentence structure or must risk losing communicability:

Even the most gifted orator, however, cannot depart too far from the speech patterns accepted by the community in which he lives without running the grave risk of being misapprehended or of being only partially understood. (91)

An elementary linguistics textbook locates the grammatical acceptability of a sentence in its semantics and offers this sentence as an example of grammatical unacceptability: "My lawnmower thinks that I don't like it" (Borsley 5). A similar example is Stein's "There is no authority for the abuse of cheese" (TB 26). These sentences are grammatically unacceptable because they "conflict with our views of how the world is" (Borsley 4): each of the examples anthropomorphizes an inanimate object. Although these sentences conform to grammatical conventions, it is difficult to imagine a context in normative discourse in which they might occur. Sentences must be grammatically complete (containing subject and related predicate) and grammatically acceptable (conforming to accepted patterns of language use) in order to fulfill discursive function.

Roland Barthes perceives the notion of completeness as an authoritative quality:

The Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions. Whence its completion: how can a hierarchy remain open? The Sentence is complete: it is even precisely that language which is complete. (50)



Because the sentence is an authoritative, closed form, it invites resistance.

Many writers, particularly poets writing in prose, tend to interrogate the sentence. Donald Wesling writes that “[one] prominent effect of the prose poem is to give sentences the greatest possible cognitive frustration and excitement” (191). When poets write in prose, “[t]he sentence becomes itself a prime subject of basic research” (Wesling 197). The sentence is at once a unit of composition and an object of study. Daphne Marlatt describes the process of extending the lines of her poetry into longer syntactic structures that came to resemble sentences until she was engaged with the sentence as a poetic device. She writes that her sentences “resembled the architecture of schoolbook sentences less than they resembled torn webs or ragged bursts of plant growth” (91). Using the normative sentence as a model, but subverting its authority by not conforming to its grammatical rules, Marlatt is able to abandon the “notion of sentence as the container for a completed thought,” and “keep the sentence conscious of its movement toward, & against, conclusion” (92). Similarly, Rosmarie Waldrop describes how she moved from an exploration of the “tension between line and sentence” in her poetry to a fascination with the sentence as a model of a complete proposition with its implication of “extreme closure” (78). She writes,

This was a challenge because my previous poems had mostly worked toward opening the boundaries of the sentence, either by sliding sentences together or by fragmentation. I tried to work with this challenge, accept

the complete sentence (most of the time) and try to subvert its closure and logic from the inside, by constantly sliding between frames of reference. (78)

The sentence presents a challenge to poets to undermine its authority and mastery by simultaneously using and subverting normative sentence structure. When the sentence is a poetic unit, its qualities of completion, closure, authority and mastery are ambiguous.

Randy Malamud examines Virginia Woolf's use of fragmentation in her novels: he writes that she fragments discourse, image, and the sentence.

Fragmentation in Woolf's texts is an ideological stance against the patriarchal order of Victorian society — the sentence fragment marks her resistance to the constricting patriarchal language that valorizes the complete sentence as a model of hegemony. Malamud writes that the sentence "is one of the linguistic structures that modernism challenges and reworks" (30). Methods of challenging or dismantling the sentence include fragmenting the sentence, dividing subject and predicate, subverting or inverting traditional and acceptable syntactic structure, word order and word function.

John Ashbery, however, conforms to normative sentence structures, but problematizes the relation of sentence completeness to discursive function. In his *Three Poems*, particularly in the middle poem, "The System," Ashbery presents grammatically complete sentences, which conform to the prescriptive standards

of sentence structure outlined by Potter and Sapir. But the communicability of Ashbery's sentences is undermined by their complexity. Multiple clauses, tangents and parenthetical intrusions interrupt the logical plot of each sentence, obscuring the original proposition. Ashbery never strays from the binary of subject and predicate, but he overloads the predicate so that it becomes a maze of ambiguous and complicated referentiality. The following sentence is one of the longest in the poem, but its construction is typical of the sentences throughout "The System":

Yet so blind are we to the true nature of reality at any given moment that this chaos—bathed, it is true, in the iridescent hues of the rainbow and clothed in an endless confusion of fair and variegated forms which did their best to stifle any burgeoning notions of the formlessness of the whole, the muddle really as ugly as sin, which at every moment shone through the colored masses, bringing a telltale finger squarely down on the addition line, beneath which these self-important and self-convoluted shapes added disconcertingly up to zero—this chaos began to seem like the normal way of being, so that some time later even very sensitive and perceptive souls had been taken in: it was for them life's rolling river, with its calm eddies and shallows as well as its more swiftly moving parts and ahead of these the rapids, with an awful roar somewhere in the distance; and yet, or so it seemed to these more sensible than average folk, a certain

amount of hardship has to be accepted if we want the river-journey to continue; life cannot be a series of totally pleasant events, and we must accept the bad if we also wish the good; indeed a certain amount of evil is necessary to set it in the proper relief: how could we know the good without some experience of its opposite? (59)

This sentence begins with the relatively simple proposition that “we are so blind to the true nature of reality that chaos begins to seem like the normal way of being,” interrupted by the lengthy parenthetical qualification of “chaos,” which results in a confusion of tenses: “are” / “chaos began.” The sentence then introduces a series of five paratactically linked propositions, and ends in a rhetorical question. Ashbery could have chosen to divide this sentence into several shorter and simpler sentences. By joining several propositions into one long sentence, he disrupts the logical plot that the reader expects and draws the reader through a process of contemplation that ends in a question rather than a statement.

Stephen Fredman in *Poet's Prose* compares the concept of completeness in normative sentence structure with the concept of wholeness in sentences that are generative rather than reproductive. He writes that completeness and wholeness are qualities that each sentence exhibits in varying degrees. Fredman's concept of completeness is similar to that implied in the comments of Potter and Sapir: it represents normative, explicit and preconceived forms of the sentence.

Wholeness, however, represents organic, implicit and generative forms of the sentence. The generative sentence “proceeds by the method of discovery: forms and ideas are held to be at large in the world (or inside the self) waiting to be discovered” (Fredman 33). Fredman takes a metaphysical view of sentence formation: the generative sentence operates as a reflection or representation of an organic whole outside the text. But he also argues that the sentence generates itself through its own writing and emphasizes the paratactic organization of the sentence that valorizes wholeness over completeness. Wholeness is the prevalent mode of operation in the sentences of poet’s prose, because it is a mode of subversion. In contrast, the sentence that valorizes completeness, with its implication of hypotactic structure, over wholeness conforms to our expectations of sentence plot: it has a logical order.

Stephen Fredman writes that Ashbery’s sentences are a complication of completeness and wholeness (115). While they conform to the normative grammar and syntactic structure of complete sentences, Ashbery’s sentences generate clauses involving new ideas that stray further and further from the original subject. They propose arguments that “become so riddled with paratactic intrusions that one has no way of deciding finally whether the argument reaches a conclusion” (Fredman 108). His sentences are generative in that each new clause leads to more intrusions that disrupt the logical order and rhetorical balance that Ashbery’s diction and syntactic construction would seem

to progress towards. Ashbery says of "The System," "there's an almost pedantic, philosophical language and lecturing quality" and yet, "the poetry keeps running afoul of clichés and pedestrian turns of phrase; ... these are the result of my wish to reflect the maximum of my experience when I'm writing; these are ways in which one finds oneself talking to oneself or to someone else" (qtd. in Fredman 111). Hypotaxis gives way to parataxis as the sentences oscillate between completeness and wholeness as the prevalent mode of operation. Ashbery subverts the logic of the binary sentence and complicates discursive function while retaining grammatical completeness.

According to Potter, there is a natural drive in any use of language, written or spoken, towards simplicity of word order and sentence structure (103). This drive increases the transparency of language and enhances communicability. Ashbery undermines this drive by constructing elaborate and complex sentences that increase the opacity of language and frustrate communicability. Ashbery is not concerned in "The System" with communicating a predetermined meaning, with the reader's ability to understand, or with his own ability to understand. Rather, Ashbery postulates that the text represents the experience of not understanding: "What I am probably trying to do is to illustrate opacity and how it can suddenly descend over us, rather than trying to be willfully obscure" (qtd. in Fredman 107). The shifts from hypotaxis to parataxis are quite subtle. The intrusion of new

propositions and arguments into the original proposition of each sentence is subtle as well. Potter remarks, "In the well-ordered sentence, the hearer or the reader will receive no jolt or check" (94). Ashbery's grammar does not jar the reader. Rather, it lulls the reader into the assumption that the normative sentence structure will fulfill discursive function. But the conclusion, the statement, the ultimate meaning of each sentence is consistently postponed. Opacity replaces transparency, and understanding becomes increasingly difficult as sentence construction becomes increasingly complex.

Ashbery further subverts discursive function through his use of ambiguous pronouns. Even in short sentences with simple syntax, meaning is seldom clear. For example, the sentence "It is all that" (59) occurs at the beginning of a paragraph. The reader cannot be certain what "it" refers to or what "that" refers to. A similarly hollow referentiality occurs in the following sentences:

It really knew what it *was*. (55)

From the outset it was apparent that somebody had played a colossal trick on something. (56)

When Ashbery does not overload the predicate and disrupt the logical plot of his sentences, he presents simple, logical propositions, which nevertheless do not fulfill discursive function because they are inconclusive statements about undefined subjects.

The “system” of the poem’s title refers perhaps to the sentence as a mode of communication, involving logical structure and simplified word order to best express a proposition.

The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one’s way to where the country is. (53)

Ashbery frustrates and complicates the system. His sentences build their own energy as they progress, stretching logic and predication to their limits and severing the relation of sentence completeness to discursivity. The traditional conception of the complete sentence requires that it contain a subject and a predicate, and conform to a grammatically acceptable structure. Ashbery demonstrates that a complete sentence is not necessarily a unified, logical proposition. A complete sentence can be inclusive to the point of over-inclusivity: the syntax can be overloaded with parenthetical clauses into which logic and understanding dissipate.



## 2. Writing/ Speech

According to linguistic theory, the sentence can be written or spoken; Simeon Potter, for example, writes that the sentence is the “most important unit of English speech,” (90) while Alan Gardiner observes that a “pause after utterance is the mark of the finished sentence” (207). Ron Silliman and Stephen Fredman, however, each assert that the sentence is a unit of writing. Silliman contrasts the sentence with the utterance, which he describes as the sentence’s correlate unit of speech.<sup>1</sup> Both sentences and utterances combine words through syntax in order to express statements, questions or commands. But the sentence and the utterance are not identical, because writing and speech are not identical. In order to understand how the sentence functions as a unit of writing, it is important to examine the distinction between written and spoken language.

De Saussure separates language and speech into two distinct phenomena: language is a social institution, while speech is the individual manifestation of language. Speech is a representation. In de Saussurian theory, although writing is also a representation of language, speech has primacy over writing:

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists

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<sup>1</sup> Fredman: “The sentence is a primary unit of writing whose purpose is to organize language and thought upon a page.” (29)

Silliman: “1) The sentence is a term derived from writing, which in linguistics is often brought over to the study of speech. Specifically, the sentence is a unit of writing.

2) There exists in speech an open-ended form like, but not identical with, the sentence of writing. Following Volosinov, I am going to refer to it as the utterance.” (69)

for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the linguistic object. (23)

De Saussure dedicates a chapter of *Course in General Linguistics* to explaining why writing, unlike speech, is not an appropriate object of linguistic study. He summarizes his attitude towards writing in the statement “writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise” (30). According to de Saussure, writing hinders the proper analysis of language. It is an inactive form that does not reflect the changes that take place in language through time. Writing is necessarily secondary; it comes after speech, after language.

Lew Welch also asserts the primacy of the spoken form of language over the written form:

Language is speech. Any other form, the printed or the taped one, is a translation of language. (30)

Whatever is written down is a translation of speech. It cannot become language until it is “played”, respoken. (32)

According to Welch, writing is inactive, and it does not become active until it is restored to speech. Speech has an immediacy that writing lacks. In Welch’s analysis of language, he stresses the force of immediacy of speech.<sup>2</sup> Speech exists

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<sup>2</sup> Welch describes a guide in a winery who interrupts his well-rehearsed speech with an exclamation about a small child who is about to fall into a vat of wine. Welch writes that in his

in the moment, while writing is a posterior representation.

Lyn Hejinian recognizes that writing can be as active as speech, because any use of language is active:

Language itself is never in a state of rest. Its syntax can be as complex as thought. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active – both intellectually and emotionally. The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. (34)

This is an important observation for the distinction between the sentence and the utterance. While the sentence has spatial and temporal properties, the utterance exhibits only temporal properties. While speech is a physical and hence spatial phenomenon, the measure of speech is only temporal; the utterance can only be apprehended in the moment of its utterance. In contrast, the sentence, as a unit of writing, can be apprehended as a physical object (a block of type on a page) before its linear, temporal organization is activated by reading. Because the sentence is delimited by its notation, a reader's interaction with the sentence is not bound to its temporal properties. Roman Jakobson compares the temporal properties of spoken and written language:

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exclamation, the guide "was using language in an exact relationship with his consciousness. ... He spoke without thinking or remembering. He simply spoke" (40).

The former [spoken language] has a purely temporal character, whereas the latter [written language] connects time and space. While the sounds that we hear disappear, when we read we usually have immobile letters before us and the time of the written flow of words is reversible. (*Verbal Art* 20)

Sentences in a text can be read at random, backwards, partially, and so forth, because sentences comprise a spatial organization (punctuation) as well as a temporal organization (syntax).

Syntax is linear and temporal.<sup>3</sup> Syntax is psychologically ingrained. Whenever we encounter words, we always attempt to integrate them into a syntactic order. It is a psychological phenomenon that Welch demonstrates in his example of sentence recognition. He relates a story of demonstrating to a child that every utterance is syntactic and that it is impossible to think of an utterance that is not:

“I can’t is a sentence” said I, and then I told him to put a capital at the beginning of one of those things and a period at the end of it, and to pretend he was talking when he wrote – to talk it first, and then write it down. (36)

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<sup>3</sup> “The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: a) it represents a span, and b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line” (de Saussure 70). As chains of signifiers, syntactic constructions share the characteristics of

Welch distinguishes the “spoken” sentence from the written sentence in terms of punctuation. But punctuation is at once arbitrary and conventional. Silliman cites a recorded telephone conversation that could be transcribed into sentences in 64 different ways without altering the meaning of the conversation (65).

Determining where one utterance ends and where the next begins is not exact. But determining where a sentence ends and begins is simple, because of the convention of punctuation. Initial capital letters and terminal periods or equivalent marks of punctuation are surer indications of sentences than syntax, which has indefinite boundaries.

As a unit of writing, the sentence exhibits a spatial dimension — it takes up space on the page. Ron Silliman writes that “there is no sentence but a determinate sentence and this is fixed by the period” (69). He emphasizes the spatial dimension of the sentence over its temporal dimension. Similarly, Fredman writes that the sentence is “a visual rather than an aural means of organization” (30). In the sentence, linear, temporal syntax occupies a spatial dimension determined by the convention of punctuation used in writing. Fredman writes that the sentence is the “meeting place of language and writing”<sup>4</sup> (32). Contrary to de Saussurian theory, writing is not the mere representation of

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the signifier: “The elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking. Combinations supported by linearity are syntagms” (de Saussure 123).

language, but rather a co-operative with language in sentence formation.

Sentences comprise both the temporal syntagmatic plane of language and the spatial dimension of writing.

As a unit of speech, the utterance has only a temporal dimension – the utterance can be measured as it occurs through time, but it has no lasting presence in space. As such, the utterance is not determinate; its boundaries are not clear. But the utterance has an immediacy that the sentence lacks. It is this immediacy that Lew Welch associates with an active use of language. He writes that writing only becomes language when it is “respoken”; when its temporal dimension is accentuated, when it has presence in the moment, when it is immediate.

Gertrude Stein writes sentences that emphasize temporality and that achieve the immediacy of speech. Her sentences are not representations of language but rather presentations of language. She achieves immediacy by foregrounding the materiality of the elements of writing: words and syntactic relationships.

Stein writes “you have to put some strangeness, as something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun”

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<sup>4</sup> Fredman writes that grammar, syntax and words are linguistic; that is, they belong to language. According to Fredman, only the sentence itself is non-linguistic: the sentence is a formal convention of the writing system. (32)

(LMN 7). Her aversion to nouns is well documented: according to Stein, nouns are inactive sentence elements. Once they perform their function of naming things, they do not do anything else, and are, as such, uninteresting:

A noun is the name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it.

... Nouns are the name of anything and just naming names is alright when you want to call a roll but is it good for anything else. (LMN 125)

When a noun is used in writing too often, it loses vitality:

And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, [the poet] could call on those words and find that they were just wornout literary words. The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them; they were just rather stale literary words.

(LMN 7)

Nouns become conventional and worn-out when they are used in conventional ways; when they occur in sentence structures that do not challenge readers' expectations. Stein recognizes the importance of sentence structure and the place of the noun in the syntax of a sentence in determining how a reader reads the noun.

In normative syntactic structure, nouns are either subjects or objects. A noun not only names a thing but also indicates its place in the plot of the sentence. When normative syntax is disrupted, the noun's function can become ambiguous. The fact of the noun has primacy over its function: the material

aspect of the noun is more prominent than the place it occupies in the grammar of the sentence, and thus the noun is reified as an object. The ambiguity of noun function is apparent in the following sentences from *Tender Buttons*:

Cane again to the presupposed and ready eucalyptus tree, count out  
sherry and ripe plates and little corners of a kind of ham. (TB 30)

Cake cast in went to be and needles wine needles are such. (TB 32)

A large hat is tall and me and all custard whole. (TB 14)

In the first sentence, the noun "cane" is neither the subject nor the object of the sentence. Rather, it would seem to occupy the place of an imperative verb; in any case, it is not functioning as a noun. Similarly, in the third sentence, Stein sets up a list of qualities that modify the subject of the sentence, "hat." The hat is "tall," "me" and "all custard whole." The nouns "me" and "custard" seem out of place in the list because they are in apposition to the adjectives "tall" and "whole."

Placing nouns into positions usually occupied by adjectives renders the function of the nouns unclear and disrupts the logic of the sentence.

Disrupted syntax affects other elements of the sentence. The function of all the parts of speech (verbs, prepositions, adjectives and articles) become unclear.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Quartermain cites the following sentence from *How to Write*: "The which is an article." In this sentence, "ambiguities undermine the reader's control of meaning by violating grammatical convention, for if *the* is an article, then the sentence is fragmentary; if *which* is an article then the sentence redefines the parts of speech, provoking along the way a neat little word play in which we ask 'which *which*?' The definiteness of the article begins to slide" (22).



Syntax in a normative sentence is invisible. The words of a sentence combine in a logical manner to reveal a logical plot. Jarred into an awareness of syntactic relations that are alogical, the reader may not be able to integrate the words of a sentence into a meaningful structure, or to make sense of the sentence, but she cannot deny the presence of the words.

A sentence instead of increases. (*HTW 26*)

In this sentence, the function of the word “increases” is unclear. The plot of the sentence consists of a noun phrase (“A sentence”) followed by a prepositional phrase (“instead of”). If “increases” is read as a noun, the sentence is fragmentary. If “increases” is read as a verb, the prepositional phrase is incomplete, because the requisite noun is lacking. Either way, the sentence is neither grammatically complete, nor grammatically acceptable.

The syntax of the sentence remains invisible until the last word, which jars the reader and forces the reader to refer backwards through the sentence to attempt to integrate the ambiguous “increases” into a meaningful relationship with the rest of the words in the sentence. The final word calls itself to the reader’s attention and presents itself as a hindrance to the reader’s comprehension of the sentence. It becomes tangible and immediate. Likewise, the syntactic relationships between the other phrases and words of the sentence become problematic and tangible.

The syntactic connections between words in these sentences are not

obvious and there is more than one possibility for interpretation. The syntax of the sentence shifts with the addition of each word and hinges on the ambiguous and multivalent function of each word. These sentences present language word by word. They are not representations of prior ideas, because they do not valorize one interpretation over the other possibilities. Stein's sentences have immediacy; the meanings of each sentence are created as the sentence is written, or as it is read. As Hejinian points out, reading is a form of composition:

The "open text" often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material, turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction. (28)

Stein's sentences are "open" in this sense, because they resist easy interpretation. By making the structure of her sentences "strange," Stein problematizes an easy acceptance of syntax as the invisible structure behind a sentence and of the function of words as intangible signifiers. The materiality of her words and the syntactic relationships connecting them have primacy over their communicative functions within the sentence.

Stein achieves the effect of immediate composition through the self-referential nature of many of her sentences. Her sentences call attention to their composition, reifying themselves as compositions rather than representations.

A lake is an article followed by a noun a lake is an article followed by a

noun a lake which is there. (*HTW* 197)

In his analysis of this sentence, Peter Quartermain points out that the sentence sets up an expectation of definition (22). "A lake is..." would seem to imply that the sentence will provide a definition of the word lake in reference to the world outside of the text. But the sentence refers back to itself and instead describes the phrase with which it begins. "A lake" is not (only) a reference to a body of water, it is "an article followed by a noun." Stein valorizes the lexical objects over their referential function and emphasizes her preference by repeating the first nine words of the sentence. She then reverses this preference in the final five words of the sentence, by asserting that the lake "is there." The sentence is now dealing with a lake that does exist somewhere and that the sentence is making reference to. But Stein's use of the phrases "a lake" is still ambiguous, because not only is the lake "there" wherever there may be, the phrase "a lake" is undeniably "there" in the sentence, as Stein has repeated it three times.

The sentence is anaphoric – it refers back to itself, rather than outside the text. As such, the sentence is not representational; it does not impart information or contribute to a narrative that is prior to the composition of the sentence. Its composition is immediate. The function of the words in the sentence shifts with the addition of each new word, as the syntax of the sentence becomes increasingly problematic and increasingly visible.

Charles Bernstein describes this technique of problematizing syntax in

terms of creating alternate vectors:

...working at angles to the strong tidal pull of an expected sequence in a sentence – or by cutting off a sentence or phrase midway and counting on the mind to complete where the poem goes off in another direction, giving two vectors at once – the anticipated projection underneath and the actual wording above. (“Semblance” 38)

Disrupting normative syntax confounds expectation and reifies disjuncture. The discrepancy between a reader’s expectation of a fluid and invisible syntax structuring the sentence into a logical plot, and the unexpected presentation of a jarring syntax made visible and immediate, reifies the words of the sentence and their relationships as material objects, present and immediate.

The disruption of syntax is a method of rendering the elements of language material and restoring an immediacy to the written sentence that is generally associated with speech. In Stein’s writing, the sentence is not an inactive representation, but rather an active presentation of language. She emphasizes the moment of composition, with each word leading the sentence into multiple possibilities of interpretation. Her sentences exhibit the immediacy of spoken language, as well as the spatial, visual organization of written language. Stein’s attempts to revitalize the noun in her compositions also revitalize the sentence.

As an authoritative structure, marked by the values of completeness and acceptability, the paradigmatic sentence invites resistance. The sentence is the site of hegemonic grammatical operations, which enforce the constricting, patriarchal nature of language. As such, a critique of complacent modes of language usage implicates the sentence. John Ashbery's example shows that resistance to the discursive function of the sentence can be located within normative sentence structure. While Gertrude Stein often uses normative sentence structures, she also writes sentences that challenge and disrupt syntactic logic, locating her resistance to grammar in a destabilization of grammatical operations. Stein transgresses the paradigm of the sentence.

## Gertrude Stein and the Sentence

### 1. How to Write

Throughout her writing career, and particularly in the period when she wrote *How to Write*, Gertrude Stein struggled with the sentence. Marianne DeKoven writes that Stein “felt herself to be pitted against the sentence and the paragraph throughout her experimental career” (116), but Stein’s engagement with the sentence is more complex than simple opposition. Stein’s shifting conception of language and of the sentence can be traced from her early “insistent” style, exemplified by *The Making of Americans*, through the “lively” style of *Tender Buttons*,<sup>1</sup> through to her ruminations on grammar, most of which are collected under the title of *How to Write*. In *The Making of Americans*, Stein rejected punctuation because she felt that it halted or slowed down the continuity of writing. The continuation of writing was important to Stein because she was concerned with recording each moment as it occurred in a continuum;

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne DeKoven categorizes Stein’s works according to different styles. She writes that “[t]he division of her work into chronological styles is much more meaningful than the division into works or genres. ... I do not believe that the writing collected under any of [Stein’s] titles constitutes a “work,” in the way we normally understand that word: a coherent literary unit, separate and distinguishable from any other, which it is the critic’s task to account for as a whole” (xv). DeKoven defines the characteristics of Stein’s insistent style as “...a reduced, simple vocabulary, emblematic keywords, incantatory rhythm, and above all, repetition,” (51) while in her lively style “...lexical meaning, syntactical structure, and sound and rhythm patterns are all activated separately – sometimes harmoniously, sometimes dissonantly” (68).

she was concerned with representing the present as accurately as possible at each moment in the written composition. As such, she composed sentences of increasing length and complexity, rarely straying from and never abandoning “correct” syntax, and reiterating concepts through the use of repeated and varied participial phrases. Stein describes how shortly after the composition of *The Making of Americans*, her concern shifted to the elements of language – the force of particular words, the relation of word to object:

...words began to be for the first time more important than the sentence structure or the paragraph. Something happened. I mean I felt a need. I had thought this thing out and I felt a need of breaking it down and forcing it into little pieces. (Haas 17)

She began to compose shorter, sharper, more ludic and musical sentences through a method of association, both lexical and semantic. Stein attests that during this period she wanted to divorce words from their referential functions and from their semantic contexts. She recognized, however, that it is impossible to use language without recourse to syntax:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and

found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (Haas 18)

And any human being reading words has to make sense out of them: there is a propensity in the human mind to perceive syntactic relationships between any words placed in contiguous formation; an overwhelming need to make sense, at the syntactic level at least, if not at the semantic or expository levels. In her inquisitive style of *How to Write*, Stein examines grammar, language, sentences and paragraphs. Certainly Stein is aware of, and resists, the authoritative construct that the sentence represents. But she does not abandon the sentence; rather, she explores the compositional possibilities that the model of the sentence presents when syntax is divorced from the rigidity of grammatical rules.

Stein does not offer a cohesive, comprehensive or coherent theory of the sentence, in *How to Write* or in her lectures. She offers (often misleading) clues about her conceptions of and opinions on the sentence, and a body of work comprised of texts that use and resist the sentence in different ways and with varying degrees of extremity.

*How to Write* is a curious book. Stylistically, it is somewhere between Stein's poetic writing and her expository writing. At the poetic end of Stein's spectrum is the style of *Tender Buttons*, which presents language and uses the sentence as a unit of composition. *Tender Buttons* is not explicitly self-reflexive; it



does not comment on its own poetics or its use of the sentence as a unit of composition. At the other end of the spectrum, Stein's lectures are (meant to be) expository; they offer elucidations of Stein's thoughts, theory and compositional praxis. But the lectures are not particularly lucid. They can be elusive, elliptical, aphoristic and contradictory. Stein makes assertions in the lectures without explaining how she arrived at her conclusions and without offering supporting examples or explanations of her logical processes. When Stein discusses, for example, the separate "balances" of sentences and of paragraphs, she does not explain how she determines these balances or what they entail. The reader must create her own conception of balance as it relates to grammatical structures. Similarly, when Stein writes about "emotion" in sentences and paragraphs ("In a book I wrote called *How to Write* I made a discovery which I considered fundamental, that sentences are not emotional and that paragraphs are." [LMN 59]), the reader must formulate for herself a scheme for understanding Stein's use of the term. The reader cannot trust Stein's assertions, even though they occur in the context of discursive prose. Thornton Wilder, in his introduction to *Narration*, observes that Stein writes about ideas, but places the burden of explicating her ideas on the reader:

These ideas are presented to us in a highly abstract form. Miss Stein pays her readers the high compliment of dispensing for the most part with that apparatus of illustrative simile and anecdote that is so often employed to

recommend ideas. She assumes that the attentive listener will bring, from a store of observation and reflection, the concrete illustration of her generalization. (vii)

Alan Knight characterizes Stein's use of language in her poetic texts as private and argues that her lectures approach a public use of language that allows the reader a method of decoding her private language:

In her more accessible writings, such as her lecture/manifestoes, she is moving closer to identity, giving us language that is still in relation, still recognisably part of the business of living, but still with enough private language to force us to question the foundations of language as a transparent vehicle for meaning. What we do when we try to find theoretical coherence in Stein is try to find the stages that connect the public use of language to the private use of language and thereby develop a lexicon that will enable us to decode what were once seen as unreadable texts. (165)

Although Stein enacts an expository mode of writing in her lectures, she does not write in a fully "public" language. Her lectures remain "private" in their refusal to subordinate style to communicative intention. Stein's techniques of repetition and insistence, her resistance to normative grammar and her refusal of the conventions of punctuation are as necessary to the structure of her lectures as they are to her experimental or poetic texts.

*How to Write* is both poetic and expository; it is a text of doing and a text of thinking about what is done and how it is done. *How to Write* is full of statements about sentences, but can the reader trust these statements? More accurately, can the reader decontextualize Stein's statements about sentences and assume that they are expository, that they form a discourse about the sentence? Stein offers many definitions and descriptions of the sentence, most of which follow the model of "A sentence is/does..." or "A sentence is/does not..." She also offers many examples of sentences followed by a judgment: "This is (not) a sentence." Although Stein uses the grammatical structure of definition, her definitions do not define. Many of her assertions are elusive. Some contradict one another. Some are impossible to integrate into a meaningful paradigm of language description. *How to Write* presents itself as metalanguage<sup>2</sup>—language used to write about language. Out of context, Stein's metalinguistic statements seem incomplete and irrelevant. Even within the context of *How to Write*, her metalinguistic statements resist meaningful articulation: they cannot be paraphrased; often they engender the expectation of definition or elucidation, but end in non-meaningful contiguity based on association, rhyme or repetition:

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<sup>2</sup> Roman Jakobson characterizes metalanguage as any use of language that focuses on the code common to the addresser and addressee (i.e. the lexical code of English). He writes, "A distinction has been made in modern logic between two levels of language: 'object language' speaking of objects and 'metalanguage' speaking of language" (*Language in Literature* 69).

A sentence is why they bequeath left left left left right left. (HTW 158)

Sometimes a sentence is in reappearance that they like it if they made a choice and they were and went to the door which is a porch. (HTW 171)

Stein assumes a metalinguistic terminology, but frustrates the teleology of metalanguage. Roman Jakobson writes that the purpose of metalanguage is to clarify the code shared between language user and language receiver (*Language in Literature* 69). Stein's metalanguage does not perform a clarifying function; rather, it is subsumed under Stein's insistence on the signifier, on the material aspects of language, over the signified.

"Sentences," the longest section of *How to Write*, asks the question "What is a sentence?" And it contains many answers:

A sentence is made by coupling. (HTW 115)

Sentences may be alike. (117)

A sentence does not make a division. (139)

A sentence is a shove with when they love. (141)

A sentence is what they will mean if they are caught by their hours. (142)

A sentence is never displaced. (143)

Sentences are indubitable. (143)

A sentence makes a rhyme. (177)

Think of a sentence as an equivalent. (182)

A sentence is the same. (182)

A sentence does have parts. (182)

Think again of a sentence it is not anything. (192)

A sentence is plainly not an affectation. Even if it is a disturbance. (200)

A sentence never needs to be like what there is when there is some of it  
that is the same. (209)

And so a sentence is always connected. (209)

It would appear that Gertrude Stein is trying to define the term “sentence.” But it would also seem that Stein either knew before she began writing the text, or came to the conclusion as she was writing the text, that a definition of the term “sentence” is impossible, and ultimately, irrelevant. It is more useful to understand how the term has been understood in the past, what the limitations of that understanding are, and how sentences can be used to subvert the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of language.

The unanswered question “What is a sentence?” then becomes a refrain, a bass-note for the text as it circles around the idea of defining or concretizing the term “sentence” without actively doing that. Perhaps the best characterization of how “Sentences” enacts the problem of definition is a quotation from Lew Welch: “I do not know what a sentence is is a sentence” (36). Likewise, what is a sentence is a sentence. The question is subsumed in an answer that is neither comprehensive nor progressive; it does not define what a sentence is, it only asserts that the question is contained within the conceptual category of sentence.

The question persists, but the answer subverts and denies the possibility of answering the question. Gertrude Stein's metalinguistic mode is then ironic. One cannot get "out" of language; one cannot gain an objective distance from language in order to answer what appears to be a very basic question about language. At best, Stein can jolt the reader out of a complacent acceptance of grammar. She attempts to renegotiate the terms of our communal agreement as language-users — that words signify, that syntax transports meaning. She cannot back out of the contract, but she can force us to look at the small print. Stein crosses the boundary between language and metalanguage only to circle back in, to find that the boundary has shifted.

Despite its engagement with metalanguage, "Sentences" is also a poetic text. Stein uses poetic tropes: alliteration, assonance, association, etc. Many of her sentences are composed and juxtaposed to create rhythm:

Helen will do is a sentence. A Helen will do is a sentence and a Helen will do is a sentence. A Helen will do is a sentence. In place of a Helen will do a Helen will do is a sentence. (HTW 155)

The text operates by emphasizing a mode of composition that Jakobson terms the "poetic function"<sup>3</sup> of language, in which equivalence of word sound and

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<sup>3</sup> Jakobson writes, "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (*Language in Literature* 71), resulting in an ambiguity of referential signification: "The supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous" (*Language in Literature* 85).

length take precedence over meaningful signification. Despite the expository mode of the text, sound, images and play are powerful features of "Sentences." Is the refrain "What is a sentence?" a unifying phrase for the poetic text? Stein uses the technique of repeating and varying one phrase in order to unify the random associations and sentences of her poetry.<sup>4</sup> It is tempting to assign that function to the question in "Sentences" and assume that the question is not significant, and that the definitions Stein presents are not significant, that they are not attempts at explicating aspects of sentence grammar. But perhaps "Sentences" in all its circularity, evasion and false leading does contain an answer. It is not prudent to read *How to Write* as an expository and discursive discussion of the sentence, nor is it wise to treat it solely as an exercise in the poetic function of language. The challenge *How to Write* presents the reader is: how to read?

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<sup>4</sup> Two texts that exemplify this technique are *Lifting Belly* and "Patriarchal Poetry." In *Lifting Belly*, Stein's continual repetition of the title phrase infuses the phrase with an erotic urgency apart from but complementary to the erotic connotations of the phrase itself. Similarly, in "Patriarchal Poetry," Stein's repetition of the title phrase in a variety of random, disjunctive (and often domestic) contexts defuses the political connotations of the phrase, while emphasizing the ubiquity and intractability of traditional, authoritative modes of poetry:

Patriarchal poetry and not meat on Monday patriarchal poetry and meat on Tuesday. Patriarchal poetry and venison on Wednesday Patriarchal poetry and fish on Friday Patriarchal poetry and birds on Sunday Patriarchal poetry and chicken on Tuesday patriarchal poetry and beef on Thursday. Patriarchal poetry and ham on Monday patriarchal poetry and pork on Thursday patriarchal poetry and beef on Tuesday patriarchal poetry and fish on Wednesday Patriarchal poetry and eggs on Thursday patriarchal poetry and carrots on Friday patriarchal poetry and extras on Saturday patriarchal poetry and venison on Sunday Patriarchal poetry and lamb on Tuesday patriarchal poetry and jellies on Friday patriarchal poetry and turkeys on Tuesday. (*Bee Time Vine* 259)

One cannot decontextualize any of Stein's definitions or descriptions of the sentence and assume that they are serious attempts at definition or that they have discursive validity. *How to Write* is not an easy book to quote from; presenting a statement out of context, and ignoring other statements that contradict the statement or invalidate it, diminishes the complexity of the text. Although many of the sentences in "Sentences," decontextualized, can be read as assertions of Stein's opinions on the sentence, it is necessary to be wary of assuming that Stein is in fact making a valid assertion. Stein presents contradictions, many within the space of a single sentence, throughout *How to Write*:

Any time that they go they stay. (HTW 20)

I find no difficulty in yes I said no. (28)

Does it make any difference if a sentence is balanced it does and it does not. (35)

The door was open as well as closed.

The door was open.

As well as closed. (106)

The part that grammar plays. Grammar does not play a part. (108)

Stein uses contradiction as a structuring principle in a similar text that also examines sentence grammar, "More Grammar for a Sentence." She asserts that a sentence is not natural and that a paragraph is natural. She then contradicts this



formulation, reasserts it, varies it, and plays with the notion of asserting and contradicting:

There is no such thing as a natural sentence but there is such a thing as a natural paragraph and it must be found. (364)

A sentence is natural. (366)

A sentence is not natural. Why is a paragraph not natural. A paragraph is not it is not not natural a paragraph is not it is a paragraph and it is not as that that is a paragraph to tell. Do tell why is a paragraph just as much as ever natural. (367)

Sentences are not natural paragraphs are natural and I am desperately trying to find out why. (371)

A paragraph is never finished therefore a paragraph is not natural. (372)

In other words a paragraph is not naturally a natural thing but it is. (375)

What is a sentence and why cannot it be natural. Because it is a sentence.

A sentence is not unnatural. (375)

Both assertions (that a sentence is natural and that a sentence is not natural) are equally valuable; both are simultaneously true and untrue — Stein seems to imply that it is irrelevant. Her disregard for expository statement makes it impossible to cite her sentences as conclusive statements.

On the other hand, one cannot paraphrase the sections of *How to Write*, because they resist interpretation. One cannot arrive at a statement of what any

of the sections of *How to Write* ultimately conclude, or of what Gertrude Stein is saying about sentences, about grammar and about language. How one can read and attempt to understand *How to Write* is to examine short passages or single sentences and their contexts, their referential denotations and poetic connotations, and hypothesize on the understanding Gertrude Stein arrives at in the text on the nature of the sentence as an object of interrogation and as a unit of composition.

According to Richard Bridgman, Stein tries to get away from grammar in *How to Write*, valorizing instead individual words. He writes that, for Stein, “[w]ords, not the rules for their distribution, constitute reality,” but that Stein also recognizes that words “gain their power through the authority conferred upon them by the linguistic system in which they operate” (96). Bridgman perceives in Stein’s writing an uneasy compromise between the “pragmatic value” of convention and the desire for spontaneity and immediacy in composition. Accordingly, Bridgman writes, Stein is suspicious of the sentence; it represents “a compromise at best, a surrender to predictability rather than an acceptance of the perils of audacity. ... The sentence could, she suspected, be arbitrary and therefore free” (197). While there is resistance in *How to Write* to the deceptively unifying whole that the sentence represents, Stein does not reject the sentence. Rather, she interrogates and subverts the function of grammar. As noted above, Stein attempted to negate grammar through a focus on the word,

but came to realize the impossibility of words existing in a text outside grammar. Words form syntactic associations whenever they appear in contiguity. Stein understands the ubiquity and necessity of grammatical relationships.

In the following example, Stein distills the model of the complete sentence into its “elements,” the parts of speech that make up sentences: noun, verb, article and preposition. She offers examples of each of the sentence elements, then reconstructs a sentence from them:

A noun. Horace. A verb. Coaling. A preposition. With him. An article.

The. A sentence. The coaling that they did when he was with them with them they were there with them. (*HTW* 135)

But the (re)construction is a trick. The verb “coaling” functions in the sentence as a noun; the noun “Horace” is replaced with the pronoun “they”; the prepositional phrase “with him” becomes “with them,” while the “him” becomes “he,” shifting from object to subject. The functions of words shift in the movement from their static state of definition to their active state of use within a particular sentence. Thus the definitions of parts of speech are not absolute. The functions of words can only be identified and defined within the context of a particular sentence. Each sentence renegotiates the use of words and their grammatical relations within its own boundaries.

Stein acknowledges yet resists the authoritative model of the sentence as a complete construction that must contain subject and predicate, noun and verb:

A sentence is made of an article a noun a verb. The time to come is a sentence. (HTW 155)

“The time to come” conforms to Stein’s paraphrase of the rule of complete sentences: it does contain “an article a noun and a verb.” But it is not a complete sentence; rather, it is an infinitive verbal phrase. Stein demonstrates that grammatical rules are not absolute: her sentence conforms literally to the requirements of complete sentence construction, although it is not logically a sentence.

Stein’s struggle with the sentence focuses on the valorization of the sentence as a unit of logic or of communication. She often refers to the functions sentences can perform within a text: for example, telling and explaining.

A sentence can retell that they wished they were strange. (HTW 119)

This sentence explains that today there is some sunshine. (139)

That is a simple sentence that means something. (163)

This is a sentence that explains as well. (175)

Stein judges that some of the sentences within the text are not actually sentences because they perform a function.

A description has no interest as a sentence once when it is getting as better. (HTW 150)

A sentence is one thing and remembering what he said is another thing. (155)

A reflection is not a sentence a delight is not a sentence whether they are there is a sentence. (157)

Now suppose they were steaming in a glass with a chicken and it broke would she be quick. That is not a sentence because it makes her smile. (168)

This is not a sentence because it refers to a custom. (179)

This is not a sentence it is a statement and an account. (192)

Stein implies that the referential function or utilitarian quality of a sentence is not a factor in determining the value of a sentence. Although sentences can explain, mean, or refer, those functions are auxiliary. The fact that a sentence is takes precedence over what a sentence does. But Stein contradicts herself. She writes that a sentence should not be used ("A sentence should never be employed." [170]), and also asserts that sentences do or ought to have use value:

A sentence must be used. (HTW 35)

A sentence comes to be for use. (125)

All these sentences are fruitful they may be included in embroidery. (136)

There is no jeopardy in usefulness. This is not alone a sentence it is a reason. (137)

Think of the sentence they like it. What do they do. They do like it. (141)

Have and to have. That is a sentence that is not employed. (187)

They made made them when they were by them. This is a sentence. It has

no use in itself because made is said two times. (26)

Of course, Stein does not necessarily locate the use value of a sentence in referential function. Whatever use value Stein assigns to the sentence, she exhibits a disregard for the utilitarian view that regards the sentence as a unit of logic and communication, as a vehicle for meaning. In *How to Write* sentences can explain, tell, describe and refer, the sentence can be a vehicle for meaning, but the composition of a sentence is not dependent upon referential function. When Stein writes "Pleases by its sense. This is a fashion in sentences" (27), she implies that sense is not a requisite quality of a sentence, but rather a fashion that could easily change. DeKoven writes that the sentence is "the ultimate referent of all sense-making activity" (116); Stein disassociates sense and sentence. Sense making may ultimately lead to the construction of sentences, but sentences do not have to make sense.

That is an easily made sentence and it easily makes sense which is an easily made sentence which easily makes sense. (HTW 204)

In this example, sentence and sense are placed in a conjunctive relationship: the concepts of a sentence being made and of a sentence making sense are parallel but not contingent or causal. The sentence is "made" *and* it "makes sense." A sentence can perform a referential function, it can have a use value, but use value is not an integral component. A sentence does not have to be a vehicle.

If a sentence is not only a vehicle for meaning, what is it? What criteria can

one apply to determine what a sentence is? In "Lecture 2" of *Narration* Stein discusses the differences between sentences and paragraphs. She writes that a sentence is a "thing that exists by internal balancing" (18), while a paragraph "exists not by a balance within but by a succession" (22). Unlike a paragraph, which involves progression, a sentence is a static object. Stein further outlines her conception of sentences:

I said prose concerned itself with the internal balance of sentences which are things that exist in and for themselves and are not complete as anything because anything existing in and for itself does not have to have completion, if it exists in and for itself there is no relation of it to it and therefore there is no element of completion, it is a thing that exists by internal balancing that is what a sentence is... (18)

Stein makes it clear that criteria are irrelevant. Her view of the sentence is purely descriptive rather than prescriptive. She identifies balance as the determining factor of sentences, but offers no insight into how to recognize or how to construct balance within a sentence. She implies that apprehending the sentence as an object is more important than examining the relationships between the elements within the sentence. According to Jane Palatini Bowers' interpretation, Stein prefers the spatial aspect of sentences to their temporal aspect. Bowers writes that Stein resists grammar because its operation makes language a temporal medium, while for Stein, the ideal sentence is not a continuity but

“simply a ‘wedding,’ the physical joining of words in space” (142). While a reader can apprehend a sentence as a visual object before reading it, and acknowledge the sentence as a spatial construct, reading a sentence is always a temporal act. Sentences are always syntagmatic and therefore temporal constructions. Stein’s term “balance” refers perhaps to the grammar of a sentence; or more specifically, to the syntactic interdependence of sentence elements. She writes that the balancing of a sentence comprises the distribution of the parts of speech in a sentence: “...think how a sentence is made by its parts of speech and you will see that it is not dependent upon a beginning a middle and an ending but by each part needing its own place to make its own balancing...” (*Narration* 22). Stein’s statement that sentences are made by internal balancing and do not require completion could be paraphrased thus: words integrate through syntax to form sentences, which are objects that require no external justification or determination.

Assigning the sentence status as an object, Stein implies that the boundaries between sentences are readily apparent and absolute. Although Stein does not offer a methodology of sentence construction, she implies that the limits of particular sentences are obvious and irrevocable. In the following sentences, however, Stein expresses hesitation over the boundaries of particular sentences. She demonstrates that a sentence can comprise a phrase that could itself be an independent sentence:



A part of a sentence may be a sentence without their meaning. Think of however they went away. (HTW 26)

Now for a sentence. Welcome to hurry. That is either a sentence or a part of a sentence if it is a part of a sentence the sentence is he is welcome to hurry. (HTW 26)

Two possibilities are immediately apparent in Stein's first example: "However, they went away." as an independent sentence; and "However they went away,..." in which the phrase is a dependent clause. Each is equally plausible. Sentences are not as static or as rigidly determined as Stein implies in *Narration*. A sentence is not an object as much as it is a level of integration: words integrate into phrases, phrases into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. Stein's hesitation over the process of integration and her difficulty in identifying what is a complete sentence and what is a part of a sentence demonstrates that integration is not a regular or absolute process.

A sentence, then, is not an object, but a site. Neil Schmitz, in his analysis of the sentences in *Tender Buttons*, writes, "Structure is momentary construction made and unmade by the writer pushing into the silence of the next moment" (125). Writing is processual; as the main compositional unit of writing, the sentence registers process but is not reified by it. A sentence is the site of integration, of contiguity (syntactic or non-syntactic), and of referential function. A sentence is the spatial site of temporal processes.

Steve McCaffery in "The General Economy" compares writing to an economy "concerned with the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text" (*North of Intention* 201). He distinguishes two types of economies present in any text: the restricted economy that privileges meaning and operates through "investment, profit, accumulation, and cautious proceduralism" (NI 203); and the general economy, in which "excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, and consequently without meaning" (NI 201). As textual sites, sentences register the operations of both economies. The general economy manifests itself within the restricted economy by means of ruptures within the order of the restricted economy. Ruptures are points in the text where meaning is threatened; within the restraint of the restricted economy, the loss of meaning is assigned a value and recuperated into a meaningful structure. One of the ways general economic forces erupt within a text is through an emphasis on the materiality of language, a valorization of the signifier over the signified.

Some of Stein's sentences in "Sentences" approach a general economy of writing, through their focus on the materiality of language:

With fill with fill will will will with with them. (HTW 144)

This sentence is a succession of words; it is contiguous, but it presents an "aimless" contiguity. The words would seem to combine based on similarity of

sound (“fill” rhymes with “will”; “with” has an alliterative association with “will”) and rudimentary phrasing (the syntactic combination of “with” and “them” into a prepositional phrase). The words are not integrated into a higher order of grammatical arrangement (they do not form a complete or acceptable sentence) or of meaningful arrangement (they do not refer).

McCaffery writes, “The refusal to integrate and raise to a higher compound level of meaning releases contiguity from the institution of hierarchy” (*NI* 218). The figure of grammatical hierarchy is the sentence. The aimless contiguity of Stein’s succession or string of words releases it from the paradigm of the sentence with its emphasis on the utility of meaning. Stein’s sentence does not carry meaning; as such, it has no function, and consequently, no use value. The entire sentence (visually, and according to the conventions of punctuation, the succession is a sentence) would seem to constitute an aimless expenditure.

But Stein qualifies the sentence:

With fill with fill will will will with with them. This is not a sentence. This is a song.... (*HTW* 144)

Assuming that Stein’s “This” refers to the preceding sentence, the sentence is not an aimless contiguity; while it is not constructed with the paradigm of the sentence as a model, its composition does have an end. Is the composition of the “song” a profitable, rather than wasteful, activity within the restricted economy of Stein’s text?

The words in the sentence resist integration into higher structures and resist ideation: the sentence is neither complete nor meaningful. But the words do have use value; their materiality, their sonority, is valuable in the composition of the "song." Under the force of Stein's redefinition of this particular succession of words, an aimless contiguity, unable to be integrated into a higher order of grammar or meaning, constituting a rupture within the text, is recuperated. It is not a wasteful sentence; it is, rather, the graphic representation of a succession of sonorities constituting a song. Not an aimless expenditure, but a utilitarian construction. Although the sentence-song risks the loss of meaning, it recuperates the phonic materiality of the words as useful within another system that does not valorize meaning (not text but song). Of course, this system remains undefined and ultimately arbitrary. But Stein's presentation of a non-utilitarian contiguity, and her immediate recuperation of that "wasteful" activity into a spontaneous system in which it is not wasteful, mimics the operation of a restricted economy, in which "loss of meaning [is] made meaningful by being assigned a value" (NI 203).

This playful evasion of commitment to either a restricted economic mode of writing or a general economic mode of writing recurs throughout *How to Write*. Stein's ruptures are intentional and unintentional. She resists the hierarchical, authoritative sentence with its valuation of ideation, by using it and undermining it simultaneously. The majority of the sentences in *How to Write* are

grammatically acceptable, lucid and expository. Stein presents sentence fragments as equivalent to complete sentences, but the majority of these are grammatically acceptable phrases. Stein's sentences are sites of meaning and ideation, and also sites of resistance. They are successions of words, syntactic or non-syntactic. They involve recuperation into meaningful structures or the loss of meaning: exposition or aimless expenditure. That ruptures occur within Stein's text is undeniable. But how does the sentence as a site relate to those ruptures? Is the sentence the site of a rupture that indicates the operation of a general economy within the text, or can the sentence itself be a rupture?

A sentence should not refer make it a reference to hyacinths or bulls or their kind or equivalent it should refer to beauty and decision it should also have contentment it should never think a sentence should never think of letting well enough alone. (*HTW* 186)

In this sentence, the phrase "make it a reference" disrupts the syntax of what is otherwise a lucid and relatively straightforward referential statement: "A sentence should not refer to hyacinths or bulls..." The phrase cannot be integrated into the sentence, even with the application of an absent punctuation. If the phrase is marked off from the rest of the sentence through the use of commas, dashes, or parentheses, turning it into an expository aside or qualifying clause, the phrase still does not fit into the syntactic arrangement of the sentence, because "it" has no grammatically logical referent. The phrase occurs in

apposition to the verb “refer,” disrupting the contiguity of the verb and its preposition “to,” while appropriating the preposition into its own syntax. There is a semantic equivalence between the verb and the phrase: both signify the activity of referring. But the phrase does not add to the meaning of the sentence: it is at best a redundant repetition. Nor does the phrase disrupt the logical plot of the sentence in any irrevocable or fatal manner: it does not derail the sentence from its referential track. The phrase does not add or detract from the sentence; it simply appears in the sentence without being recuperable into the syntax of the sentence. It is an example of an aimless expenditure of lexical, semantic and syntactic energy — a rupture that signals the force of a general economy within the restricted economy of the sentence. This sentence is the site of a rupture.

The following example marks a juxtaposition of a grammatical and an agrammatical sentence:

One who meant one one at a time.

They made it because of the time. (*HTW* 179)

Because the sentences are the same length, and because they both exhibit the conventions of sentence notation (initial capital letter, terminal period) they are visually and typographically equivalent. But the second sentence is grammatically complete and acceptable, while the first sentence is neither. The first sentence gestures towards integration: words integrate into phrases, although with no clear boundaries or determinants, but there is no overall

integration into a utilitarian sentence with a determinate meaning. The lack of interior punctuation problematizes the integration of words into phrases and prohibits the integration of phrases into sentence, resulting in an indeterminate and pluridimensional contiguity. Contrasted to the complete, utilitarian and hence meaningful second sentence, the first sentence constitutes a rupture in the text. Stein cultivates the expectation of complete sentences, and continuously undermines that expectation with the presentation of successions of words that erupt as non-meaningful sentence constructs that cannot be recuperated into the text.

In her destabilization of the sentence as a hierarchical paradigm, Stein approaches a writing of the general economy, which McCaffery characterizes as:

...a linguistic space in which meanings splinter into moving fields of plurality, establishing differentials able to resist a totalization into recoverable integrations that would lead to a summatable "Meaning."

This plurality, moreover, would be irreducible and must demonstrate the intransitive drive towards de-centrality, the fact of a limitless loss and the status of writing as a scriptive gesture of infinity within the finitude wherein all spatio-temporal activities must exist. As such it could never rest at a holistic proposal but only stress the infinite play of parts within the significatory activity called writing. (NI 221)

The most relevant feature of McCaffery's description to Stein's writing is his

notion of play. Although *How to Write* is a serious and concentrated effort on Stein's part to understand and elucidate the interrelations of parts of speech, sentences and paragraphs, the text is infused with playful constructions: puns, circularities, evasions, contradictions. McCaffery writes that the writing of the general economy marks a shift from utilitarianism to the valorization of pleasure in the reading and writing of texts, and cites Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* as an example of this valorization (NI 203). Barthes discusses the eroticism of reading and of writing and posits that texts can offer the experience of bliss or the untranslatable "jouissance." He distinguishes pleasure in reading from bliss in reading:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 14)

Stein's interrogation of the sentence could be read as a text of bliss; she unsettles historical and cultural assumptions about the sentence, and prompts a crisis in the traditional view of the sentence. Stein thinks through the problem of sentence definition by writing sentences: by subverting and dismantling the hierarchy of



the grammatically complete and acceptable sentence and playing with the sentence fragment. Barthes writes that the pleasure of the sentence is “more or less ludic”; there is pleasure in mimicking the artifact “created by rhetors, grammarians, linguists...” (51). He equates the complete, hierarchical sentence with power:

...it is the power of completion which defines sentence mastery and marks, as with a supreme, dearly won, conquered *savoir-faire*, the agents of the Sentence. The professor is someone who finishes his sentences.

(Barthes 50)

In contrast to the figure of an authority who uses the sentence to confirm and propagate power, Barthes presents the figure of the writer:

A writer is not someone who expresses his thoughts, his passion, or his imagination in sentences, but *someone who thinks sentences*: A Sentence-Thinker (i.e. not altogether a thinker and not altogether a sentence-parser).

(Barthes 51)

Gertrude Stein's engagement with the sentence in *How to Write* occupies this dual, liminal role: she acknowledges yet resists grammatical convention, while struggling with the problem of sentence definition and interrogating sentence structure.

## 2. Punctuation

Gertrude Stein writes in *How to Write*, “The great question is can you think a sentence” (35). Recalling the axiom that a sentence represents a complete thought, Stein also raises the issue of sentence notation. Does a sentence exist prior to its notation? As a unit of writing, a visual rather than an aural means of organization, a sentence requires notation. Sentences comprise two parallel operations: syntax and punctuation. Syntax organizes the logical plot of the sentence, while punctuation organizes the separations and juxtapositions of phrases and clauses within sentences and of sentences within paragraphs. While syntax, a linguistic operation, is psychological and structures thought (to the extent that thought is a function of language) as well as writing, punctuation is a facet of graphicity — it belongs to writing. As the meeting place of language and writing, the sentence comprises the linguistic functions of grammar and the notational function of punctuation. A sentence can represent the linguistic manifestation of thought, but the sentence itself is not manifested prior to its notation. An examination of the conventions of punctuation is an integral aspect of the study of Gertrude Stein’s sentences, because she uses non-conventional punctuation in her destabilization of normative sentence grammar.

The conventions of punctuation ensure the logical organization of a text and show how a text is to be read. Punctuation marks divide a text into sentences and sentences into clauses. When a sentence is a unit of logic or communication,

these divisions are predetermined by logical syntactic structure. Punctuation marks do not effect division, but simply mark it. A period signals the end of a sentence; but the end of the sentence is not determined by the period, but rather by the degree of grammatical completion that the sentence has attained. Similarly, the comma signals many grammatical relationships between elements within a sentence (serial – linking items within a list; parenthetical – separating independent sections of the sentence from the main plot of the sentence; separating and joining independent and dependent clauses). But these relationships do not result from the use of commas; rather, the relationships between sentence elements are syntactically and logically determined prior to the notation of the sentence.

The function of punctuation in writing is analogous to the function of pauses in speech. Punctuation marks are graphic representations of prosody, of silence and intonation (the terminal intonation contour at the end of a phrase; the rising intonation at the end of a question; and so forth). In common contemporary usage, punctuation marks signal pauses of increasing duration in the following order: the comma signals the shortest pause, followed by the semicolon, the colon, the dash, and the period signals the longest pause. But there is “only more or less incidental correlation between the punctuation marks and the different intonation contours” (Gleason 431). Wallace Chafe, studying the flow of information in speech and in writing, finds that speakers divide their utterances

into units of intonation that are generally five to six words long, with each intonation unit introducing only one new piece of information. In oral delivery of written discourse, the same intonation units occur: "Regardless of how a passage was punctuated, an oral reader will force it into a series of intonation units of spoken language size" (Chafe 25).

Punctuation is not a reliable indicator of the rhythms of speech. This is because pauses and intonation are not determinate, while punctuation marks are. Because speech occupies only a temporal plane, its only indicator of logical organization is the length of the pauses between words and the tone involved in the articulation of particular words. These factors vary from speaker to speaker. Depending on the patterns of speech of a particular speaker, a longer pause can occur between two words that are significantly syntactically dependent on one another than the pause that occurs between two significantly discrete phrases. Alan Gardiner writes that communication involves the division of a discourse into "manageable" units: "Both in speaking and in writing it is found practical to split up every long communication into sections of greater or less length" (Gardiner 208). In speech, however, this division has no determinate markers: "Both the speaker's breathing and the listener's powers of interpretative digestion have to be taken into consideration. In written speech, the second of these is of little account, and the first of none..." (Gardiner 208). Communication in speech relies to a great degree on the intuition of listeners and on the context

of the utterance. Written discourse does not need to rely to the same extent on context or common understanding, because punctuation marks have a determinate function.

It is this determinate function, as well as the materiality of punctuation marks, that allows them to act as signifiers. The period signifies the end of a unit, a terminal intonation, a pause, a silence. The comma signifies a pause between units, a falling intonation, a breath, an aside. In normative written discourse, punctuation marks signal the logically determined divisions between units, and represent how the units would be articulated relative to one another in speech. Thus when we read a comma, we know that it signals a pause between clauses, but, because the clause is logically determined, we can anticipate the pause between it and the next clause. The comma marks, but does not effect, the separation or combination of sentence elements. But the association of the comma with a pause persists even when the comma occurs in a sentence that is not logically determined. If a comma occurs in the middle of a clause (for example, between a subject-noun and its verb) it still signifies a pause or a falling intonation. Similarly, a period retains its significance as the end of a sentence unit and as an indicator of a lengthy pause between two units even when it occurs mid-sentence.

The period can split the binary of subject and predicate in the grammatically complete model of a sentence into two sentence fragments:

These. Have not a cousin. (*HTW* 105)

Visually the fragments are sentences: according to one of the many definitions of the term “sentence” the OED offers, a sentence is “such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another” (qtd. in Silliman 64). Sentences involve the linear organization of syntax and the visual, spatial organization of punctuation. When the use of punctuation over-rides the expected sequence of syntax, the sentence retains its visual organization, but lacks logical completion.

Punctuation can interrupt syntax and logic. Punctuation can be used to create sentences that are not units of logic and clauses that do not follow the predetermined organization of logical communication. The conventions of sentence notation can subvert normative sentence structures. While notation represents the grammatical (syntactic and semantic) organization of language in written discourse, notation can also be used to affect the syntax and semantics of a text.

Thus when Bob Perelman writes “The period / Ends the sentence by force.” in his poem “MATURE EJACULATION” (“Sense” 64), he recognizes that the period is a signifier, that it has agency. The presence of the period signifies ending regardless of what degree of syntactic or logical completion a sentence has attained. The period determines the sentence. Ron Silliman frustrates this powerful function of the period in his poem “For L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.” The

poem presents grammatically complete sentences and sentence fragments,  
neither of which end with conventional punctuation:

Word's a sentence before it's a word — I write sentences — When  
words are, meaning soon follows — Where words join, writing is — One's  
writing is one's writing — Not all letters are equal — 2 phrases yield an  
angle — Eye settles in the middle of word, left of center — Reference is a  
compass — Each day — Performance seeks vaudeville — Composition as  
investigation — Collage is a false democracy — Spelling's choices — Line  
defined by its closure: the function is nostalgic — Nothing without  
necessity — By hand — Individuals do not exist — Keep mind from  
sliding — Structure is metaphor, content permission, syntax force — Don't  
imitate yourself — We learned the language — Aesthetic consistency =  
voice — How does a work end? (*The New Sentence* 57)

Dashes occupy the pause between syntactic units which occurs in normative writing between the period ending one sentence and the first word of the next sentence. The poem can be read as one long sentence with definitive breaks between syntactic units, or as multiple sentences that refuse the closure the period confers. This interpretation grants the fragmentary sentences equal status with the grammatically complete sentences by virtue of the dash as an indicator of separation between sentences. The dash, however, not only separates but also joins. Its function is similar to that of the comma: a signifier of a pause but not of

closure. Further ambiguity results from Silliman's use of the initial capital letter, which complements the period by signaling the beginning of a new sentence after the termination of the previous sentence by the period. Silliman frustrates the notational determination of the sentence.<sup>5</sup> He ends the poem with conventional punctuation – the question mark performing a similar function as the period – but resists closure. The site of definitive ending subverts the concept of definitive ending: "How does a work end?" The question also applies to the unit of composition of the poem: how does a sentence end?

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<sup>5</sup> bpNichol conducts a similar refusal of the determinant function of the period in his poem, "KETCHES," which rejects all diacritical markers, but maintains the integrity of each sentence through the use of space. Although the sentences are not grammatically acceptable, because their syntax is disjunctive and overdetermined, they are marked as discrete sentences by Nichol's use of several blank spaces between each sentence. The blank spaces recall the determinant function of the period as a signifier of ending, but do not carry the same force as the period:

i want to start with the light on the floor somehow the point of transition moving from  
 door to door bed to bed room the particular square or pattern different the balls of  
 dust that gather there having not swept it carefully in such a long time you lean back in  
 the chair adjust yourself for the listening this observation is simple then that you are  
 seated there your ears open your eyes you let the senses take over if you're careful that  
 discipline allowing a yielding the outer edges of the body gather it all in the listening  
 points & the learning the carpet is red sometimes sometimes the rug is static yielding  
 to the pressure of feet crossing the floor to join you sometimes at night sitting by  
 myself the room adjusting to the pressures of the day the tangible presence of those who  
 have entered & gone away again their footsteps what they said recurring my responses  
 body or action & their laughter tears rage exchange going to bed or waking the last  
 traces of sunlight in the room that reminder the world is bigger the pressure of what is  
 real & outside us i hate to draw the blinds blinding myself chairs are different wood or  
 leather as the faces of all things change aging i am part of what i move thru air or water  
 accumulating words books frames of faces & balloons speaking later the walls change  
 shape the location of doors & windows you are still speaking listening all parts of you  
 attend the intent the same the learning (*An H in the Heart* 219)



Gertrude Stein recognizes that the period can have agency. In her 1935 lecture, "Poetry and Grammar," Stein catalogues her perceptions and opinions about punctuation. She valorizes the continuation of writing over the conventions of punctuation; she writes that the question, exclamation, and quotation marks are unnecessary and "uninteresting," because the functions that they perform are apparent in the construction of a sentence. These punctuation marks are superfluous to writing:

...what is the use, if you do not know that a question is a question what is the use of its being a question. The same thing is true of the exclamation.

And the same thing is true of a quotation. (*LMN* 129)

Dispensing with the need for superfluous punctuation marks, Stein turns her attention to the punctuation marks that, in her opinion, do affect writing: the comma and the period. First she explains her distaste for punctuation as a convention that disrupts the flow and continuation of writing:

When I first began writing I felt that writing should go on. I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it, what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on which was at that time the most profound need I had in connection with writing. (*LMN* 130)

Juxtaposed to Stein's need for writing "to go on" is her recognition that writing also has to stop — both as a physical necessity for the writer, and as a "natural" occurrence that does not prevent further writing:

Stopping sometime did not really keep one from going on, it was nothing that interfered, it was only something that happened. And as it happened as a perfectly natural happening, I did believe in periods and I used them.

(LMN 130)

Stein accepts the period as the signifier of ending, because "stopping" is both necessary and natural; she incorporates the period into her view of writing as an ongoing process in which ending and beginning again are part of the rhythm of continuation, of writing "going on."

Stein then moves into an appreciation of the agency of the period. Because the period signifies the end of a unit, and because it has the force to end a sentence, the period can be used in an "infinite variety of ways" towards an infinite variety of ends. When periods "commence breaking up things in arbitrary ways," Stein implies, periods assume an agency that competes with and complements the agency of the writer:

They [periods] could begin to act as they thought best and one might interrupt one's writing with them that is not really interrupt one's writing with them but one could come to stop arbitrarily stop at times in one's writing and so they could be used and you could use them. Periods could

come to exist in this way and they could come in this way to have a life of their own. (*LMN* 130)

In contrast to the agency and power of the period, the comma, in Stein's view, is a "servile" punctuation mark that facilitates the logically predetermined organization of sentences into constituent clauses. Following the dictates of convention, the comma "is a way of replacing one's own interest," which is why Stein intensely dislikes the comma: "I do decidedly like my own interest my own interest in what I am doing" (*LMN* 131). She explains that her interest involves simplicity through complication; she likens complex sentences to knots in a thread. Untangling the knots is a complicated process that results in a simple linearity. Using the comma, however, is analogous to cutting the thread (*LMN* 132). Thus for Stein, the comma is "an artificial aid":

Complications make eventually for simplicity and therefore I have always liked dependent adverbial clauses. I have liked dependent adverbial clauses because of their variety of dependence and independence. You can see how loving the intensity of complication of these things that commas would be degrading. Why if you want the pleasure of concentrating on the final simplicity of excessive complication would you want any artificial aid to bring about that simplicity. (*LMN* 132)

Stein argues that the comma is superfluous, both as a marker of logical sentence structure and as a signifier of pauses in oral reading:

...at the most the comma is a poor period that it lets you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath. (*LMN* 132)

Commas do not tell readers to pause; a pause is already implicit in the syntactic structure of the sentences, and in the rhythms of speech. As noted above, speakers will divide texts read aloud into regular intonation units based on information flow and syntax, regardless of the placement of commas.

Stein dismisses both of the functions of the comma (logical and prosodic) as unnecessary and “degrading.” She argues that the period, on the other hand, is a necessary punctuation mark, because it entails “stopping altogether,” which “has something to do with going on.” Stein distinguishes the period from the comma in terms of function and nature: while the period has a “life of its own,” the comma is “servile.” While the period enables the continuation of writing, which is paramount in importance to Stein, the comma jeopardizes Stein’s goal of simplicity through complication by “artificially” simplifying sentence structure.

The scheme that Stein presents for the interpretation of punctuation marks is radically different from the idea that punctuation marks signify pauses in reading, and breaks in syntax, in incremental lengths. Punctuation, for Stein, is not a continuum; rather, Stein places the primary punctuation marks, the comma and the period, in opposite camps, based on function and on nature. She writes

that the colon and semi-colon can exhibit the attributes of either the comma or the period, depending on how one perceives them. The colon and the semi-colon can represent “stopping altogether” in which case they would have “something of the character of the period,” or they can be “dependent on use and convenience,” which is, according to Stein, a character trait of the comma. Recognizing that colons and semi-colons *could* be perceived as periods, Stein nevertheless asserts that she can only perceive them as commas:

I think however lively they are or disguised they are they are definitely more comma than period and so really I cannot regret not having used them. (LMN 131)

In “Poetry and Grammar,” Gertrude Stein dismisses the majority of punctuation marks as superfluous to writing. In practice, she complies with her opinions as explicated in the lecture. While commas abound in *Tender Buttons*, the only other punctuation mark is the period. There are almost no commas in *How to Write*. Colons, semi-colons, dashes, exclamation marks, quotation marks, and question marks are rare in all of Stein’s texts. To what extent does Gertrude Stein interiorize the functions that punctuation marks perform in normative prose in the grammar of her sentences?

Theodor Adorno writes that punctuation is not external to language, nor is it simply a representation of the oral delivery of written language:

...instead of diligently serving the interplay between language and the

reader, they [punctuation marks] serve, hieroglyphically, an interplay that takes place in the interior of language, along its own pathways. Hence it is superfluous to omit them as being superfluous: then they simply hide. Every text, even the most densely woven text, cites them of its own accord – friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language. (300)

Notation is generally conceived of as extra-linguistic: while the syntax and semantics of a sentence are linguistic features, the notation of a sentence is a feature of writing, and as such does not belong to the conceptual sphere of language (see Fredman 32). Although punctuation marks function as signifiers of unitization and of prosody, they are separate from language. Adorno incorporates punctuation into language; even when the marks themselves are not graphically present, the function that they fulfill is still present in the grammar of the language (in the syntax and semantics of the sentence). Gertrude Stein does not need to use question marks, because the fact that a sentence poses a question is apparent in its syntactic structure. The following sentences from *Tender Buttons* contain questions and answers that are identifiable despite the lack of appropriate punctuation marks:

Change a single stream of denting and change it hurriedly, what does it express, it expresses nausea.

An eye glass, what is an eye glass, it is water. (TB 25)

Stein does not need to use exclamation marks, because the surprise or emphasis that the exclamation mark signifies can be evident in the grammar of a sentence. Likewise, the complexity of dependent relationships between sentence elements that commas serve to clarify is apparent in the structure of Stein's clauses. Adorno recognizes and Stein practices the interiorization of the functions of punctuation marks in language; they are implicit in the grammar of sentences, whether or not they are graphically present.

When Gertrude Stein does use commas, they do not serve conventional practical use. Her commas in *Tender Buttons* do not mark the dependent relationships between clauses, nor do they divide complex sentences into logical units. Rather, commas in *Tender Buttons* serve rhythm and repetition; they join together phrases that mirror one another in the repetition of words or syntactic construction.

The sight of a reason, the same sight slighter, the sight of a simpler negative answer, the same sore sounder, the intention to wishing, the same splendor, the same furniture. (TB 5)

A cause and no curve, a cause and loud enough, a cause and extra a loud clash and an extra wagon, a sign of extra, a sac a small sac and an established color and cunning, a slender grey and no ribbon, this means a loss a great loss a restitution. (TB 6)

Stein is not concerned with the paradigm of the grammatically complete sentence

in this text. Although she uses normative syntax extensively in *Tender Buttons*, the focus of the writing rests at the level of the phrase. The above sentences are composed of discrete phrases linked by commas. Each phrase repeats a word from the previous phrase; the effect is that of ending and beginning between each phrase. The commas here act like periods as Stein defines them in “Poetry and Grammar.” The commas signal “stopping” and continuation. This is a pattern that recurs throughout *Tender Buttons* with several variations. Stein uses commas to join phrases that do not repeat particular words, but rather repeat syntactic structures. The following sentence, for example, is composed of prepositional phrases:

Around the size that is small, inside the stern that is the middle, besides the remains that are praying, inside the between that is turning, all the region is measuring and melting is exaggerating. (TB 22)

She also uses commas to join together phrases in which one word performs different grammatical functions:

A transfer, a large transfer, a little transfer, some transfer, clouds and tracks do transfer, a transfer is not to be neglected. (TB 24)

In the phrases that make up this sentence, “transfer” acts as an independent but variously modified noun, a verb, and a noun occupying subject position in a complete sentence. Each phrase except for the last ends with “transfer”; this creates a chant-like rhythm and rhyme scheme within the sentence. The reversal



of the position of “transfer” in the last phrase confers a finality on the last phrase that is reinforced by the period.

In the following sentence, the phrases display symmetry of composition, semantically and syllabically:

Sugar any sugar, anger every anger, lover sermon lover, centre no  
distractor, all order is in a measure. (TB 50)

Each phrase in this sentence contains three disyllabic words, except for the last two. The pattern of repetition in the first three phrases is broken in the last and fourth phrases, and the three-word pattern of the first four phrases is broken in the last. In the succession of phrases, a pattern is set up and gradually discarded.

Stein uses this device of juxtaposing similarity and difference throughout *Tender Buttons*. She uses commas to link phrases in patterns of symmetry and variation that create rhythm within each sentence. Her sentences are visually delimited by initial uppercase letters and terminal periods, but they do not conform to syntactic conventions or to the conventions of punctuation. Each sentence is comprised of a collection of syntactically discrete phrases related through the devices of repetition and symmetry. The comma in *Tender Buttons* is a signifier of a pause or break, as well as a linking device: the comma separates the phrases that a sentence comprises and joins phrases to create sentences that are units of rhythm rather than units of syntactic or logical cohesion.

In normative written discourse, punctuation marks represent grammatical

and logical organization, and reflect the prosody of spoken language. In her lectures and in her poetry, Gertrude Stein criticizes the conventions of punctuation, and abandons the normative use of punctuation marks, especially the comma. Instead, she uses the comma to create rhythm within her sentences, and to explore the devices of repetition and symmetry within the sentence.

### 3. Stein's Theory / Mac Cormack's Praxis

Gertrude Stein's theoretical writing resists easy interpretation. Her statement that sentences are unemotional and paragraphs are emotional is problematic in its insularity: Stein does not justify or fortify her argument through examples or illustrations. Applying Stein's statement in the context of literary criticism requires illustration of her concepts. I have chosen to discuss Stein's conception of the sentence and of the paragraph in comparison to the text of Karen Mac Cormack's *Quirks & Quillets*, because Mac Cormack presents a useful counter to Stein's theory. While Stein distinguishes sentence and paragraph as two discrete structures and two different modes of integration, Mac Cormack collapses this distinction in a text that conflates sentence and paragraph into one uncategorizable textual unit.

One of Gertrude Stein's sentence definitions ("A sentence is an interval in which there is finally forward and back." [HTW 133]) resonates with an observation Jeff Derksen makes about Karen Mac Cormack's *Quirks & Quillets*:

...reading the text now may even move backward, modifying what was already read, before moving on. (95)

Both these statements suggest that the unilinear movement of the conventional sentence can be undermined when the sentence is not a unit of communication or logic, but is rather an "interval," or, as Christian Bök describes Mac Cormack's sentences, an "inventory of words" (22). Stein and Mac Cormack both write

sentences that foreground the materiality of words; Mac Cormack's sentences foreground as well the materiality of syntax. Releasing language from its symbolic function, her sentences also release syntax from its ordering function. Syntactic integration does not have to be a unidirectional, predetermined movement serving a logical arrangement. The reader can perceive, assume or force syntactic connections in a multitude of ways, determining multiple meanings and associations, and in more than one direction. The reader can enact a "writerly" participation in the text not only at the level of the symbolic meaning of the language of the text, but also at the level of the grammar of the text. Sentence structure is not rigid or concrete; rather the sentence is a container for the pluridimensional possibilities presented by the contiguity of words contained within its boundaries.

This notion of fluidity within the structure of the sentence is antithetical to Stein's description of what the sentence "has been" in "Lecture 2" of *Narration*:

...a thing that exists by internal balancing that is what a sentence is or rather what a sentence was perhaps now there is no longer any need for a sentence to be existing perhaps not, in any case certainly that is what a sentence has been a thing that by internal balancing made itself what it was. (18)

A sentence is inside itself by its internal balancing, think how a sentence is made by its parts of speech and you will see that it is not dependent upon

a beginning a middle and an ending but by each part needing its own place to make its own balancing... (22)

A sentence has not really any beginning or middle or ending because each part is its part as its part and so the whole exists within by the balance within... (22)

Stein's use of the term "balance" implies rigidity: the sentence comprises an interdependence of units arranged in a particular structure. Perhaps Stein is equating the notion of balance with the function of syntax. In a syntactically normative sentence, words combine into phrases (noun phrases, verb phrases and etc.); each word belongs to either the subject or the predicate; each word is accounted for; and each word contributes to the logical whole of the sentence. If syntax creates the "internal balance" of a sentence, then syntactic disjuncture disrupts that balance, resulting in a sentence that is non-normative and not grammatically correct: not what a sentence "has been."

Stein articulates this conception of the sentence within a comparison of sentence and paragraph. Ron Silliman notes that the first step in the integration of sentences into larger works is from sentence to paragraph (76), and he observes that "...the modes of integration which carry words into phrases and phrases into sentences are not fundamentally different from those by which an individual sentence integrates itself into a larger work" (75), implying that sentence and paragraph are similar if not identical sites in a paradigm of

integration. For Stein, however, sentence and paragraph are fundamentally different structures. She asserts that while sentences involve balance, paragraphs involve succession; while paragraphs are “emotional,” sentences are not:

...a succession of these sentences were used in paragraphing and ... these sentences existing in that way and being included by a paragraphing ending made not by their balancing but by the need of progression made a paragraph that had an emotional meaning while the sentence itself had none. (*Narration* 18)

...sentences as they have for centuries been written were a balancing a complete inner balancing of something that stated something as being existing and... a paragraph was a succession of these sentences that going on and then stopping made the emotional content of something having a beginning middle and ending. Sentences are contained within themselves and anything really contained within itself has no beginning or middle or ending... (20)

But one sentence coming after another sentence makes a succession and the succession if it has a beginning middle and ending does form create and limit an emotion. (22)

There is movement within a paragraph that does not occur within a sentence. A sentence is a rigid structure and a paragraph is a fluid structure; this distinction appears to be the basis for Stein’s assertion that sentences are unemotional and

paragraphs are emotional. Although Stein neglects to contextualize or explicate her terms, it would appear that she equates emotion with movement. The sentence's lack of emotion is related to the lack of movement in its rigid structure, and the paragraph's ability to "create and limit an emotion" is related to the movement of its fluid structure.

Stein applies her distinction between sentence and paragraph to an articulation of her resistance to the received structures of normative prose. Conceding that "...they will be with us as long as human beings continue to exist and have a vocabulary, sentences and paragraphs will be with us..." (LMN 133), Stein nevertheless asserts that she would like to abandon the structures while retaining the distinction:

And so though as I say there must always be sentences and paragraphs the question can really be asked must there always be sentences and paragraphs is it not possible to achieve in itself and not by sentences and paragraphs the combination that sentences are not emotional and paragraphs are. (LMN 135)

Describing her attempt to accomplish this, Stein writes that she created in *The Making of Americans* a structure that combined the separate balances of the sentence and the paragraph (rigid and fluid) into one balance which was "...the balance of a space not completely filled but created by something moving..." (LMN 135). Movement within the structure of the sentence is integral to Stein's

desire to dismantle the hierarchy of the sentence. The unilinear movement of normative syntax propagates the hegemonic model of the sentence as it “has been.” The multiplicity of syntactic combinations, enacted by the reader, possible in Karen Mac Cormack’s *Quirks & Quillets* signals a textual arrangement alternative to the sentence and to the paragraph that exhibits and interiorizes the qualities of both structures. Her textual arrangements signal a collapse of two distinct structures into one, and an end to the progressive integration that Silliman identifies as moving towards an ultimate “higher meaning”:

Linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning - such as emotion - integrate at higher levels than the sentence.... The sentence is the horizon, the border between these two fundamentally distinct types of integration. (87)

Silliman’s metaphor does not stand up to Mac Cormack’s text: in *Quirks and Quillets*, the sentence is not a horizon between two types of integrative movement; it is a static entity that encompasses integrative movement but prohibits integration beyond its boundaries. *Quirks & Quillets* consists of thirty-nine blocks of text that retain the graphic indicators of sentences (initial capital letter and terminal period) but not the grammatical organization of sentences. Each block of text looks like a paragraph, although it does not comprise a succession of separate sentences. Each block of text looks like a prose poem; each page presents a new block of text, varying slightly in length, but with identical



formal construction. Each block of text is simultaneously categorizable as sentence, paragraph, poem, and page. The integrative movement that Silliman identifies as occurring above the level of the sentence is a leap from block of text to collection of blocks of text (the book as a complete text). The formal sub-units of normative prose are collapsed into two units: complete text and sentence. Within the complete text, there is only one formal unit.

Syntactic integration is provisional, temporary and initiated by the reader. Christian Bök writes, "*Quirks & Quillets* provides examples of alternative sentences, whose parsing is determined not so much by either grammatical syntax or punctuated phrasing as by entropic factors in the reading process itself" (23). As Clint Burnham explains the process of reading the text, "...the clauses pile up, not as discrete & parallel units, but blurring into one another, so that the apparent verbs...serve simuluneously (sic) as connectives between noun-phrases and as breaks between clauses" (n.pag.). Virtually any word in Mac Cormack's sentences can link syntactically to the previous word or the next word in the sequence. Integration is not directed by the text; integration is at once undeterminable and overdetermined. Her sentences present the impossibility of integration into a larger unit, and yet, within the container of the sentence, there is a multiplicity of possibilities for integration. Derksen explains this paradox of integration: "Mac Cormack's sentences are not reductive to a fixed set of

meanings nor integratable into a larger unit of meaning (the paragraph, the book, etc.)” (46).

Bök points out that the multitude of syntactic possibilities hinges on each word in the sequence of the sentence: “...each word acts as a paradoxical sign of either division or elision depending on the attention span of the reader” (23). Each word marks the end of a phrase, the beginning of a phrase, or a solitary word that is not integrated into a phrase at all. Division and elision, the operations performed by punctuation and syntax, are in Mac Cormack’s sentences processes enacted by the reader at the moment of reading, with no direction from the text (direction that is provided, and insisted upon, by normative grammar).

A written sentence comprises two complementary but opposite operations: syntax and punctuation. The etymology of each term clarifies the function it performs. “Syntax” derives from the Greek roots “syn,” meaning “together with,” and “taxis,” meaning “arrangement, order, or position” (Klein 748). Therefore, syntax denotes the action of joining words in a particular order to achieve a purposeful arrangement. Syntax involves the combination of parts to create a whole. “Punctuation” is derived from the past participle of the Latin verb “punctuare,” meaning “to mark with points,” itself derived from the past participle of the Latin verb “pungere,” meaning to pierce (Klein 603). Punctuation is the act of identifying units; it involves the division of a whole into

parts. In normative grammar, syntax and punctuation operate through the parallel processes of elision and division to create an arrangement of words that functions as a sentence (i.e. has a use value, an exchange value, and is integratable into a higher unit). Mac Cormack's alternative structure invests each word with these parallel functions; each word is the site of division or elision.

The lack of intra-sentential punctuation in *Quirks & Quillets* means that the whole (each text block) is not divided into parts; it can only be apprehended as a whole. Citing a particular phrase from one of Mac Cormack's text blocks is always fraudulent, because it over-rides the alternative phrases that the text presents as possibilities synchronous to and coexistent with any particular determination of a phrase by any particular reader. For example, the text block on page 38 can be determined thus (the double slash [/ /] marks a pause between separate phrases):

These patterns afford the loquacious a dividend pink peonies smell larger than / / the room is not circuitous / / a run burned over where perhaps even weather has a dialect of absorption / / cells aren't sex / / the rifle kills / / a single battery runs on and neither comes equipped with legs.

But the following phrases are also embedded in the text, even though my citation ignores them:

...pink peonies smell larger than the room...

...weather has a dialect of absorption cells...

...the rifle kills a single battery...

Bök remarks that "...each sentence can only be paraphrased in terms of its resistance to paraphrase" (25). The only way to cite any of Mac Cormack's text without diminishing the syntactic multiplicity latent in the text is to cite the whole sentence. Each text block reifies itself as a whole, undivided and indivisible.

The only punctuation mark Mac Cormack uses is the period, which divides units at the level of the paragraph; it signals the end of one sentence and prepares expectation for the beginning of the next sentence. The period is an extra-sentential punctuation mark, signaling the close of the sentence but not affecting the arrangement of units within the sentence. In the context of *Quirks & Quillets*, the period is not active. It gestures towards the conventional notation of the sentence, but does not perform the function of dividing one sentence from the next; as Bök points out, the period is redundant, because its function is "shared simultaneously with the page itself" (24).

The reader of *Quirks & Quillets* assumes the dividing function performed by punctuation in normative prose. While the combining function of syntax is not as entirely within the agency of the reader, because Mac Cormack does use syntax, it is up to the reader to perceive or determine purposeful arrangement within Mac Cormack's sentences. She foregrounds the materiality not only of the word, but also of the syntactic sequence. Words integrate into syntactic

constructions that dissipate and give way to alternate syntactic constructions as the sentence progresses. The syntactic movement does not progress towards a construction with any value at the level of symbolic meaning. Syntax is an operation within the sentence that refers the reader only to the fact of its operation within the sentence.

Syntax in *Quirks & Quillets* is a constant flux — the effect of syntax is not a rigid balance, as in Gertrude Stein’s formulation. There is movement in the text blocks, as phrases overlap and reconvene continuously in the temporal continuum<sup>6</sup> of the sentence, but there is no succession of sentences, which is where Stein locates movement in her formulation of the paragraph. Karen Mac Cormack combines formal rigidity with syntactic fluidity; her sentences exhibit the “unemotional” quality of sentences as well as the “emotional” quality of paragraphs (equating emotion with movement). Presenting the structure of the text block as a recurring form, while releasing syntax from its unilinear, progressive function, Mac Cormack creates a structure alternative to the sentence and to the paragraph that retains but reverses Stein’s distinction between the two. Collapsing two structures into one, Mac Cormack’s text blocks are both

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<sup>6</sup> Steve McCaffery writes in “Phrase Propulsion” that the sentence in *Quirks & Quillets* is “a continuum, rather than a contiguity of textual time” (qtd. in Derksen 93).

**sentences and paragraphs, and are neither; they are both rigid and fluid,  
emotional and unemotional.**

### The Steinian Sentence

Gertrude Stein's sentence rhythms are addictive and contagious. Norman Weinstein attests that while writing his study of Stein, he "caught [himself] becoming converted to her vision, caught [himself] repeating her peculiar phraseology in [his] own writing or speaking" (102). Stein herself recognized the appeal of her distinctive sentence structure: F.W. Dupee quotes her as saying, "My little sentences have gotten under their skin" (ix). She made this comment in reference to the proliferation of parodies of her style subsequent to the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Attacking Stein for her nonsensical texts and her reliance on repetitive "nursery-rhyme" rhythms, Stein's detractors inevitably mocked her by imitating her sentence structure. Her brother, Leo Stein, also parodies her style:

Size is not circumference unless magnitude extends. Purpose  
defined in limitation projected. It is the darkness whose center is light.

Hardly can the movement arrest. Formality is subservience.  
Liquidation confluent with purpose by involution elaborates the  
elemental. Its significance protracts but virtue is dissimulated.

All men are so but not in all ways. It is the thought process but not  
detached. Relations may be elaborated and hence illumination. Though  
the mole is blind the earth is one. (qtd. in Brinnin 171)

Although Leo Stein achieves a degree of semantic dissociation similar to Gertrude Stein's, he does not effectively imitate her style. His text relies on abstract words juxtaposed in semantically irrelevant ways. But he emphasizes nouns and adjectives, while Gertrude Stein's sentences employ a democratic syntax in which small words that create structure (prepositions, pronouns and articles) have equal emphasis to words that carry information (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). Although Leo Stein repeats the declarative sentence syntax of the sentences in *Tender Buttons*, he does not use repetition as a generative device, as Gertrude Stein does. His parody is nonsensical without the rhythmic force of Stein's writing, and without her intelligent undermining of grammatical convention.

Along with Stein's detractors, her admirers also imitate her sentences. Patricia Meyerowitz, in her introduction to *How to Write*, presents her observations about Stein's philosophy of art in a recognizably Steinian grammar:

All this just about covers everything. The only thing left for a creative artist to do in his life is to do his chosen work in spite of everything and regardless of anything because when living draws to an end there are no excuses he can make to himself or to anyone else for not having done it. Either he did it or he did not do it and very often he did not. Alas very often he did not. (xx)

Rebecca Mark uses a similar technique in her introduction to *Lifting Belly*:



Gertrude Stein is a loving one and the book have just picked up is a loving book. Slowly as you will read, it will come to you a loving feeling.

(xi)

While these writers use repetition, repetition in their texts is not an insistent device, as in Stein's writing. For her, repetition is a necessary component of her creation of a "continuous present" — she records her perceptions as she perceives them, in the moment of perception. Without Stein's teleology, the device of repetition is flat and redundant, as in this imitative introduction to Stein's "What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them":

Who was Gertrude Stein and why have there been so few writers like her? We were going to tell you something about her instead of nothing because all the somethings that you've heard about her are mostly nothing or like enough to nothing, as one might say, so much like nothing in fact that it's almost as if one hadn't said anything at all. Actually, it is impossible to say anything about Gertrude Stein because saying something about someone has nothing to do with being that someone, especially Gertrude Stein. Ask Alice. (n.pag.)

Marjorie Perloff discusses the problems inherent in imitating Stein's sentences in her comparison of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with a play written by Marty Martin, *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein*. The play is a monologue in Stein's voice derived from the descriptions of Stein's life in Paris in

*The Autobiography*. Martin rewrites passages of the book in a Steinian style, involving repetition, circular logic, and simple, direct statements. Comparing passages of the play with passages from the book, Perloff shows that while Stein's narrative is complex and witty, achieving its effects as much by what it leaves out as by what it relates, the text of Martin's play obliterates Stein's masterful balance. Perloff summarizes her critique:

Like so many of Stein's early critics, Marty Martin seems to think that the famous Stein style depends upon the use of 'ordinary,' everyday diction, simple declarative sentences, and, above all, verbal and phrasal repetition, often with complicated incremental patterning. Accordingly, *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein* opens with the sentence, "It is it always is and it always most certainly is an inconvenience being evicted I know and we were." The childlike parataxis and additive repetition is calculated to appeal to an audience that vaguely knows of Stein's eccentric way of putting things, but it is actually wholly un-Steinian in its drive towards closure. ("[Im]Personating Gertrude Stein" 65)

Many writers absorb Steinian sentence structures and strategies into their poetics, without merely reproducing the surface qualities of Stein's sentences. For Robert Duncan, George Bowering, Harryette Mullen, and bpNichol (representative of a multitude of diverse writers who have been influenced by

Gertrude Stein),

It [is] not a question of imitating Stein, for copying the superficial mannerisms of her various idiosyncratic styles leads only to parody, but rather of absorbing the fundamentals of her attitude towards language, and of finding ways to apply them in the contemporary situation. (Scobie 12)

bpNichol, like Stein, generates sentences through an emphasis on sound, puns, lexical association, and minute shifts from word to word:

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green yellow dog up. I have not. I am. green red cat down. I is not. I is.  
over under under upside up is. I's is not is I's.

iffen ever never youd deside size seize says theodore (green yellow  
glum) I'd marry you. truth heart hard confusions confess all never neither  
tithe or whether with her lovers lever leaving her alone.

no no.

chest paws

and chin.

no. ("Scraptures: seventh sequence" *Selected Writing* 87)

The periods in this poem are active; they determine the rhythm of the language rather than serve the logic of sentence grammar. Nichol minimizes syntactic integration, by writing sentences that do not cohere syntactically, and by

dissolving the structure of prose into phrases and lines in which the function of words is ambiguous: for example, “paws” functions as a verb or as a noun in a list. Nichol invests his poem with the same attention to the functions of words and the same syntactic ambiguities that Stein emphasizes in her writing. The poem is processual and generative, as is the Steinian sentence.

Harryette Mullen employs similar strategies in her poetry. The writing in *Trimnings*, Mullen writes, “proceeds metonymically and associatively” to generate sentences that exhibit a Steinian focus on sound and a Steinian concern with ambiguity:

Garters garnish daughters partner what mothers they gather  
they tether. (*Trimnings* 17)

Some panties are plenty. Some are scanty. Some or any. Some  
is ante. (*Trimnings* 27)

Mullen employs fragmentation and parataxis but not the radically disjunctive syntax that Stein’s sentences employ. Meaning in Mullen’s texts erupts from the juxtaposition of words affiliated through lexical and phonic association, alliteration, rhyme, and punning:

Ad infinitum perpetual infants goo. Pastel puree of pure pink bland blue-  
eyed babes all born a cute blond with no chronic colic. Sterile eugenically  
cloned rows of clean rosy dimples and pamper proof towhead cowlicks.  
Adorable babyface jars. Sturdy innocent in pink, out of the blue packs

disposing durable superabsorbent miracle fibers. As solids break down,  
go to waste, a land fills up dead diapers with funky halflife.

(*S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T n.pag.*)

The influence of Stein's sentence structures on Robert Duncan and George Bowering is more instantly recognizable. Both writers adopt her insistent use of repetition as well as her participial verbal constructions. Duncan applies Steinian sentence structure to meditations on writing. His conception of writing is influenced by Stein's concern that writing "go on" and her concern with "beginning again and again" (LMN 23):

Beginning to write. Continuing finally to write. Writing finally to continue beginning. ("The beginning of writing" *Derivations* 41)

George Bowering applies Stein's sentence structures to representational ends. While Stein's sentences are self-reflexive, focused always on the mechanisms of language, Bowering's sentences in *Autobiology* employ repetition and variation to build narrative:

When I was thirty I had free raspberries in the back yard & I loved them.  
In the back yard & I ate them. & I ate them in the kitchen out of an  
aluminum pot. When I was thirty I loved raspberries, I loved to eat them.  
(*Autobiology* 7)

Bowering, like Stein, uses non-normative punctuation to disrupt the plot of the normative sentence. He composes long sentences by linking phrases with

commas. The commas intrude on the syntax of the phrases, disrupting syntactic linearity; the comma frustrates the forward movement of the sentence as it halts the sentence and focuses the compositional energy on disjunctive phrases.

The next place is really a series of places so that the next place is really time, that is, a series, not as on the railroad, though that is certainly, there, but I was in the force, & we always had a town or city nearby, & though we thought it was always different we always acted as if it was the same, perhaps, because we were, where we were, was always the same, though we spoke always of the difference, from time to time, of the place, & so, there you are. (*Autobiology* 75)

Bowering reifies the concept of a series, in time and space, through his use of punctuation that fractures the sentence into a series of syntactically linked but visually separated phrases.

Steinian principles of sentence construction inform the writing of Nichol, Mullen, Duncan and Bowering, but these writers do not imitate the surface qualities of Stein's sentences while reproducing the closed, authoritative mode of writing that she resists. Rather, these writers apply Stein's techniques of composition to their experimental writing.

Gertrude Stein's detractors and admirers alike respond primarily to her sentence structures, because for Stein, the sentence is the main compositional

unit. When Stein alludes to her writing in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she almost always writes about composing sentences:

She was at that time planning her long book, *The Making of Americans*, she was struggling with her sentences, those long sentences that had to be so exactly carried out. Sentences not only words but sentences and always sentences have been Gertrude Stein's lifelong passion. (47)

During these long poses and these long walks Gertrude Stein meditated and made sentences. (56)

She had come to like posing, the long still hours followed by a long dark walk intensified the concentration with which she was creating her sentences. (57)

William Carlos Williams perceives that Stein's compositional concerns are structural, rather than oriented towards meaning: "It is simply the skeleton, the 'formal' parts of writing, those that make form, that she has to do with, apart from the 'burden' which they carry" (21). Similarly, Marjorie Perloff writes:

Stein's texts, whatever their date of composition or their hypothetical genre, must be read strenuously in keeping with her own notion that, whatever else a literary text may be, its central unit is always the sentence. ("Six Stein Styles" 146)

Given Stein's concern with structure, and particularly with the structure of sentences, any analysis of her work must take into account the importance of

syntax in her texts. Although Charles Bernstein rightly cautions that “[a] purely formal approach will never exhaust all there is to say about Stein” (“Professing Stein” 145), an examination of Stein’s syntax is perhaps more relevant than an approach that only examines her semantics. Bernstein also observes that “Stein criticism is haunted by the ghost of explanation” (“Professing Stein” 142). The majority of Stein’s critics attempt to extract from her texts an idea of what she is saying, rather than attempting to comprehend what she is doing. In order to explicate what Stein is supposedly saying, her critics must construct systems of interpretation and impose these on the texts. This is counter to Stein’s compositional praxis<sup>1</sup> — as Bob Perelman notes, Stein is “...not a system builder, with the result that individual sentences in her work are less crucial than the sentences of most other writers” (*The Trouble With Genius* 149). Each sentence in her texts is an example of her engagement with the sentence as a compositional unit. Successions of sentences in her text create rhythm, accumulation, insistence — to a lesser degree, they create content, but they avoid

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<sup>1</sup> In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein uses a metaphor of a car engine to articulate her concern with structure: “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going” (*LMN* 117). This resonates with Ron Silliman’s automotive metaphor: “Larger productions, such as poems, are like completed machines. Any individual sentence might be a piston. It will not get you down the road by itself, but you could not move the vehicle without it” (78). Stein is not concerned with the practical use of the sentence (i.e. communication) but only with its structure.



discourse or paraphraseable exposition. Interpretations of Stein's texts that rely on speculations about her discursive intent tend to be unsuccessful. One of the most egregious examples of the shortcomings of interpretive criticism of Stein's semantics is Jonathan Monroe's "The Violence of Things: The Politics of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*."

Monroe perceives a political urgency in the semantics of *Tender Buttons*. He writes that the text is aggressively feminist and locates a feminist intent in the narrative that he reconstructs from the vocabulary of the text. Monroe is right in his assertion that although *Tender Buttons* presents a private language, a truly private language is an impossibility, because language is always social: he characterizes *Tender Buttons* as a "text that remains to a large extent private despite our attempts to unravel the semantic potential latent in our collectively shared associations with words" (185). Where Monroe errs is in his assumption that the associations Stein's words carry in his interpretation are universal. Using a method of semantic association based on snatching phrases out of the section of Stein's text titled "A Method of a Cloak" (TB 6), Monroe concludes that the poem is about a detective story, because of its allusions to spies and mysterious exchanges. He writes that the poem deals with stereotypically masculine themes in contrast to the majority of the poems, which "focus more explicitly on the world of *women* (186)."

Monroe comments on the false promise of Stein's use of the word

“method” in her title. Method, to Monroe, implies a way of unraveling the dense play of Stein’s syntax and semantics. Method, he writes, implies “vertical hierarchization,” in contrast to the “horizontal leveling of metonymic relationships based on sheer contiguity,” of Stein’s syntax (185). Monroe assumes that the hierarchization of ideas and words in normative grammar would allow access to the feminist content of the text, but he ignores the synonymy of hierarchy with patriarchy, specifically the patriarchal structure of language. Stein’s flat metonymy of syntactic relationships is itself a resistance to the patriarchal hierarchization of grammar — the structure of her sentences can be interpreted as a feminist destabilization of the patriarchy inherent in language. Peter Quartermain writes of Stein’s syntax: “The net result is that hierarchies are ironed out, and we read the language paratactically, non-patriarchally” (35). Monroe seeks a method in order to “finally find out what is going in an otherwise mystifying labyrinth of words” (185), but he focuses on finding a method in Stein’s vocabulary rather than in her grammar, and ignores the locus of Stein’s feminism.

Monroe does recognize that Stein’s use and abuse of grammar is informed by feminist intentions. From Stein’s comments on the noun and the comma and her discussion of the differences between poetry and prose in her lecture “Poetry and Grammar,” Monroe formulates a dichotomy of gender and grammar. He writes that, for Stein, the petrified status of nouns and the servile status of the

comma are analogous to the petrified status of women in early twentieth-century society. In contrast, the active functions of the verb and the period are distinctly masculine. Thus,

Stein's willful suppression of commas/nouns/women is simultaneously an expression of her violent love for them, as if subjecting them to the utmost restriction were itself the necessary means to liberating them from their current petrified status. (183)

But Monroe does not adequately justify his formulation; he takes it for granted that petrification and servility are feminine qualities and that activity is a masculine quality. Whether or not Stein would agree with Monroe's dichotomy is irrelevant — the analogy between grammatical functions and gender is not explicit in her lecture.

Monroe reads the poem "A Chair" (TB 9) as a discussion of marriage and widowhood and, ultimately, an argument in favour of lesbianism. His reading assumes that each word in the poem is an elaboration on the theme that he perceives:

Like "more garments," "even" shadows, and a "regular arrangement" (heterosexual, monogamous), "wise veil" suggests a conventional, "straight," socially respectable response to the husband's death. (190)

He ignores the generative aspect of Stein's sentences — her compositional strategies include semantic association, but also phonic association, punning,

alliteration, rhyme, etc. Stein's vocabulary is not necessarily representative of thematic concerns. Monroe could have reconstructed his narrative and reached the same conclusions about what Stein is saying by choosing words at random from the dictionary and examining the semantic and thematic associations the words engender. Divorcing words and phrases from the generative syntax of Stein's sentences, Monroe creates an interpretive reading that suits his argument, but reduces the pluridimensionality of reference and the complex compositional strategies apparent in Stein's writing.

Although Monroe does recognize the overdetermination of meaning in *Tender Buttons*, he asserts that this "openness" is in fact a form of closure, because "Stein's apparent liberation of meaning brings with it its own restrictions. If few texts are more satiated or overly full of meanings than Stein's, equally few are less totalizable" (179). Monroe assumes that a text must be "totalizable" or paraphraseable in order to have value. He writes that thematic interpretation such as his reading of Stein's supposedly feminist content are necessary to rescue the text from obscurity: "If Stein is to be saved from remaining, or further becoming, a mere curio of literary history, the political nature of her work needs to receive its due emphasis" (178). Monroe's argument falters when he notes that Stein's politics were, by all accounts, bourgeois and conservative (196). He attributes the paradox of Stein's personal politics and the aggressive feminism of her text to the ambivalence and undecidability inherent in her writing. He

observes that

however radical the politics of Stein's texts in some respects, they nevertheless display contradictions and unresolved ambivalences that hinder one's ability to reclaim them as unproblematic models for feminist or other revolutionary literature. (179)

Monroe attributes the difficulty of reading Stein thematically to her unconventional syntax and argues that in order to rescue "inaccessible or neglected semantic content from its syntactic concealment," it is necessary to use a form of "hermeneutic violence" that will unlock the meaning of the text and "set it in motion" (205).

For Monroe, Stein's syntax is an impediment to a useful reading of *Tender Buttons*. Paradoxically, an examination of Stein's syntax would aid Monroe's argument that Stein's writing is feminist. To the extent that *Tender Buttons* is a feminist text, it is in the destabilization of the patriarchal structure of language, in the flattening out of the hierarchical operations of grammar that a feminist intention is revealed. Monroe quotes Marianne DeKoven's observation that Stein resists "patriarchal/logocentric thought" as proof that Stein is indeed a feminist (196). But DeKoven is explicitly clear in the introduction to *A Different Language* that she uses these terms in the context of structuralist and French feminist theory. She differentiates between anti-patriarchal use of language and women's writing:

Overall, the female literary tradition has enacted its subversions of patriarchy in the realms of content and literary form rather than in the realm of linguistic structure. It is experimental writing that is anti-patriarchal in structure. (xix)

She observes that “[a]lthough Stein never intended to be anti-patriarchal, ... opposition to patriarchal modes seems to me the ultimate *raison d’être* for all experimental writing” (xvi). The patriarchal and logocentric modes of thought that DeKoven refers to are represented in the structure of English grammar. Gertrude Stein’s resistance to conventional grammar is also a resistance to the patriarchy of language. What Monroe perceives as an impediment to a political reading of *Tender Buttons* (syntactic structure) is in fact the locus where a political reading of the text can begin.

Critics who read Stein’s work structurally comment on the homogeneity of her sentences. Although Stein experimented with a number of diverse styles, there is nevertheless an identifiable sentence style apparent in all of her work. Richard Kostelanetz attests that “[a]ll her experimenting with the technology of language produced not just one original style but several, some of which are quite different from others, all of which seem, nonetheless, to be distinctly Steinian” (xxiv). Stein’s writing is diverse generically and stylistically, but it is homogeneous in its operation. All her texts exhibit attention to the mechanics of

language and resistance to a complacent use of language, particularly a complacent acceptance of grammar. Her writing is always generating, rather than representing, meaning. Michael Hoffman notes that the distinctive Stein style is characterized primarily by the “nonmimetic, playful and plastic use of words” (52). Marjorie Perloff characterizes Stein’s style in terms of its resistance to closure, as well as its syntactic and semantic displacement:

Repetition, variation, permutation, the miniscule transfer of a given word from one syntactic slot to another, one part of speech to another, creates a compositional field that remains in constant motion, that prevents closure from taking place. (“Six Stein Styles” 53)

Peter Quartermain also frames the body of Stein’s work as a resistance to convention and tradition:

Her strategy in writing, of taking language further and further away from customary and paraphraseable referentiality, from its lexical and denotative functions, derives, like her strategy of dissolving conventional linguistic and literary boundaries and genres, from her profound and persistent opposition to the authoritative and authoritarian dominance of English modes, from her opposition to Anglo-centric literary standards, conventions, and procedures, which in poems like *Patriarchal Poetry* she identifies as patriarchal and indeed elitist. (42)

At a structural, stylistic level, Quartermain’s notion of opposition applies to

Stein's use and abuse of the paradigmatic model of the sentence. The Steinian sentence is anti-hierarchical, and its oppositional energy confronts grammar. Grammar is a system that subordinates elements of language to other elements in a drive towards meaningful referentiality — grammar organizes sentences to have use values and exchange values. Stein's sentences, however, exhibit an "ironing out" of the hierarchical organization of normative grammar. Her sentences employ parataxis to create a syntactic field in which each word is equal in emphasis to every other word, in which there is "an equal perceptual stress on the perception of each word" (Weinstein 85). She resists subordination: the subordination of words to teleological ends, of syntax to hierarchical organization, and of sentences to conventionally complete grammatical organization. In her resistance to the conventions of sentence structure and notation, Stein accomplishes a radical revaluation of the hegemonic mechanisms of grammar.

Although there is no paradigmatic Steinian sentence, there are qualities that the sentences in each of Stein's styles exhibit to some degree: simple diction, repetition, syntactic disjuncture, surrealistic juxtaposition, fragmentation, unconventional use of punctuation, circular phrasing, contradiction, and an emphasis on rhythm, rhyme and the sound of words over the meaning of words. There are two methods of composition or operation that characterize the grammatical resistance that all of Stein's sentences enact: democratic syntax and



incremental composition.

Jane Palatini Bowers observes that, for Stein, “to accept grammar is to sacrifice that ‘agreeable’ succession of words in which each component is given equal value,” and she argues that Stein attempts to sacrifice the linearity of syntax to a sentence construction that is purely spatial (142). But Stein does not reject temporality in favour of spatiality. The main compositional force in her sentences is rhythm, and rhythm is always temporal. Peter Hatch, in an essay that attempts to imitate the Steinian sentence, compares Stein’s writing to the composition of music and confirms the importance of time in Stein’s writing:

Once upon a time I thought of music only in terms of pitch and pitch relationships. At that time I was not really aware of time, and syntax and time, and I was not really aware of the use of syntax to control time. In time I came to realize that music was largely about time and that Stein’s time was musical time. (n.pag)

The relation between time and space in Stein’s sentences is best formulated by Steve McCaffery in “Tenderizing Buttons”: “the sentence as A verbivocal movement thRough time / in a given space” (97).

What Bowers perceives as a preference for contiguity over syntactic (temporal) linearity is the operation that Quartermain identifies as an “ironing out” of grammatical hierarchies. The operation of Stein’s syntax creates of the sentence a field in which each word has equal emphasis. The connective words

that create structure (prepositions, articles, conjunctives) are equal to the words that carry information (nouns, verbs, adjectives), words that, in normative grammar, have more emphasis than connectives. Stein treats all the parts of speech as equal units in her construction of rhythmically oriented sentences. She levels out the hierarchic foundation of normative grammar to create a democratic syntax. Stein's writing does not oppose the temporality of syntax, but rather the hierarchy of grammar that influences normative syntax.

Richard Kostelanetz notes that in her earlier writing, Stein uses more words than usual, while in her later writing, she uses far fewer words than usual (xix). In each instance, she accomplishes revaluation of conventional grammar. In "Matisse," Stein insists on the equality of each moment of perception through excessive repetition and slight variation. Her sentences comprise endless clauses, but no subordination. She presents a continuum of paratactically linked dependent and independent clauses, which neutralizes the subordinating drive of normative grammar:

There were very many wanting to be doing what he was doing that is to be one clearly expressing something. He was certainly a great man, any one could be really certain of this thing, every one could be certain of this thing. There were very many who were wanting to be ones doing what he was doing that is to be ones clearly expressing something and then very many of them were not wanting to be being ones doing that thing, that is

clearly expressing something... (LMN 210)

In "The Portrait of Mabel Dodge," Stein uses a technique that recurs in many of her texts, notably *Tender Buttons*: she adopts the sentence structures of expository prose (declarative sentences, questions, assertions, conditional structures, i.e. "if...then..."), but frustrates the operation of description and explanation through indeterminacy of reference and phrasal repetition:

There is all there is when there has all there has where there is what there is. That is what is done when there is done what is done and the union is won and the division is the explicit visit. There is not all of any visit.

(*Selected Writings* 530)

Although her sentences recall the organization of normative grammar, their composition is driven by semantic and syntactic association, as well as an emphasis on sound:

If the spread that is not a piece removed from the bed is likely to be whiter then certainly the sprinkling is not drying. There can be the message where the print is pasted and this does not mean that there is that esteem. There can be the likelihood of all the days not coming later and this will not deepen the collected dim version. (*Selected Writings* 530)

Many of Stein's texts exhibit a movement away from syntax — her sentences become shorter, and are more obviously focused on sound rather than grammatical structure. For example, her short poem "Susie Asado" ends:

Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine and a  
bobolink has pins. It shows a nail.

What is a nail. A nail is unison.

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea. (*Selected Writings* 550)

In the final sentence the poetic function of language is the only structuring principle. Similar sentences appear throughout Stein's texts: "Single fish single fish single fish eggplant single fish sight." (*TB* 32); "The sun place the soon place, the sun" ("Article" 227).

Stein also resists grammar through unconventional punctuation. In many of her texts, she conducts a more fundamental assault on sentence structure; for example, in "Forensics," she truncates her sentences into short phrases marked by periods:

This can show. That they. Must. Accept. A denial. They have authority.

For all. That they want. As their. Treasure. And. Do they. Hope. To show.

Something. For it. Without. An appointment. Just when they went.

Usefully. In their. Destruction. In. Enjoyment. (*HTW* 395)

Although the period effectively signals the termination of a sentence, Stein's sentences are nevertheless linked syntactically. The period often divides subject from predicate, creating a tension between syntax and notation. While the majority of Stein's styles resist grammar by conforming to conventional notation while refusing the mechanism of subordination that grammar enforces, this style

resists grammar by disrupting the flow of syntax. Fracturing a grammatical construction into several sentences that are linked syntactically but separated by punctuation, Stein prevents the mechanism of subordination from organizing her phrases into normative sentences. Each word carries equal emphasis, because Stein's notation prevents the construction in which connective words are subordinated to informative words.

Repetition at the phrasal level unifies Stein's sentences. Through the devices of repetition and variation, punning, and rhyme, words and phrases in her sentences generate further words and phrases. Each sentence carries over words from the previous sentence that shift in their syntactic and semantic functions. This process of incremental composition occurs in many of her styles. In "As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story," Stein introduces phrases into the text at the beginning of each paragraph and incorporates them into the rhythm of the text, which consists of repetitions of the title phrase:

Has made, as it has made as it has made, has made has to be as a wife has a cow, a love story. Has made as to be as a wife has a cow, a love story. As a wife has a cow, as a wife has a cow, a love story. Has to be as a wife has a cow a love story. Has to be as a wife has a cow a love story. Has made as to be as a wife has a cow a love story. (*Selected Writings* 543)

The device of incremental composition in "Preciosilla" is focused on minute shifts between phrases:

Bait, bait, tore, tore her clothes, toward it, toward a bit, to ward as sit,  
 sit down in, in vacant surely lots, a single mingle, bait and wet, wet a  
 single establishment that has a lily lily grow. (*Selected Writings* 550)

Gertrude Stein's sentences are generative. Their anti-hierarchical structure favours a paratactic means of organization, by which phrases are linked without subordination, over a hypotactic means of organization. Stephen Fredman in *Poet's Prose* elides parataxis with generative forms of the sentence in contrast to hypotaxis, which signals normative sentence structures. The paratactic sentence, he writes

works by a continual sideways displacement; its wholeness is dependent upon the fraternal bonds of a theoretically endless proliferation of familial resemblances rather than the dynastic bonds of filiation. (31)

Stein employs the devices of repetition, association, and punning to create the "familial resemblances" between words that determine her sentence structures, rather than relying on preconceived sentence structures. The generative sentence is a method of discovery. McCaffery observes that using the model of the normative sentence always implicates the subordinating systems of grammar: "Producing a sentence is actually re-producing the internalities of the system by a consumptive 'use' of its rules and forms" (*North of Intention* 14). In contrast, when the sentence is generative, when form is not predetermined or re-productive, "the reader is witness to the writer's act of discovery; both attend

upon the form that is constantly emerging instead of relying upon a form already in place by contract" (Fredman 37).

Gertrude Stein's project of resisting and destabilizing the hegemony of grammar is invested in the authoritative model of the paradigmatic sentence. Ultimately, Stein's writing is aimed at dissolving the "codified repression" (McCaffery *North of Intention* 10) the sentence represents, and reclaiming the sentence as an active, generative form. The Steinian sentence is not representative – it is neither a reproduction of predetermined grammatical organization, nor a representation of "extra"-linguistic reality in a linguistic structure. Rather than employ the normative sentence for communicative or representational ends, Stein inhabits the sentence as a compositional field in which the mechanisms of language and of the sentence itself are subject to minute examination and are thus revitalized as immediate and originary acts. Stein's sentence grammar does not restrict, order, or control language; rather, it synthesizes language and writing in a compositional moment that directs its energy to the formation of sentences.

## Conclusion

When Gertrude Stein was asked by a reporter during her lecture tour of America in 1934 why she didn't write the way she talked, she responded, "Why don't you read the way I write?" I have tried in this thesis to read Stein the way Stein writes.

The way Stein writes is to compose sentences that acknowledge but do not replicate the grammar of normative sentences in conventional writing. She resists the hegemony of grammar and the patriarchy of language in her disjunctive syntax, unconventional punctuation and generative sentences. She destabilizes the conventions of language usage through her emphasis on the materiality (phonic and graphic) of language artifacts. She writes with a self-reflexive attention to the process of writing, to the mechanisms and structures of language. Because Stein does not write thematically or representationally, readings of her texts that rely on thematic or representational interpretation reveal more about the intentions and preconceptions of the reader than they do about Stein's writing. Reading the way Stein writes involves analyzing her texts formally and structurally.

Reading Stein the way Stein writes entails an examination of her sentences: how she composes sentences that do not function as units of logic or communication, how she locates her opposition to the codified and petrified



conventions of literary language in sentence structure, how she theorizes the sentence. Reading Stein's non-normative sentences requires a paradigm of the normative sentence of conventional writing against which to compare Stein's experimental writing. Because the term "sentence" has no absolute or unified meaning, but refers to a means of organization whose function shifts according to context, the normative sentence cannot be defined but only characterized according to the criteria that inform its composition. Grammatical completeness and acceptability, logical organization and communicative value are the attributes of the normative sentence. Stein undermines these attributes in her revaluations of sentence grammar.

Gertrude Stein's sentences are the site of her resistance to the hegemonic operations of normative grammar that organize conventional writing. Stein's experimental writing subverts normative sentence structure, through disjunctive syntax and through the use of punctuation to create rhythm rather than serve logical organization, in order to reclaim the sentence as an active and immediate linguistic form. In this thesis, I argue that the sentence is the main compositional unit in Stein's experimental writing and I analyze the strategies of sentence subversion Stein employs, as well as her observations on the sentence. The sentence in Stein's texts is a site of interrogation of the conventions of language usage and an object of interrogation. Acknowledging and resisting the paradigmatic model of the conventional sentence, Stein recuperates the sentence

as a generative construction in her non-representational, pluridimensional writing.

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