

STEIN'S SELF AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN
CRITICISM OF *TENDER BUTTONS*

by

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1914, readings of *Tender Buttons* have often found their interpretive anchor in the person of Gertrude Stein. Due in part to Stein's enigmatic aura and self-created status as celebrity and genius, readings of the poem often conflate Stein with her work, using elements of her life to explain the inexplicable. My project examines this tendency by constructing a condensed critical history that focuses on the earliest responses to the work as well as recent and contemporary criticism. I question the efficacy of these readings, and in hopes of developing new approaches, I end my project by examining Stein's own writings about writing and interacting with *Tender Buttons*. By suggesting new strategies and evaluating previous strategies, my project aims to encourage new ways of reading *Tender Buttons* that are less dependent on its authorial aura and can perhaps even lead to a more approachable, pleasurable reading experience.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Modernism, celebrity, psychology, difficulty, cubism, feminism, and homoeroticism have framed interpretations of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, both old and new, among several other specialized foci since it was first published in 1914. And *Tender Buttons* has elicited numerous responses, from excitement to hatred to amusement to apathy. Its unique nature and its resistance to traditional literary interpretation have made it, like its creator, a figurehead of the modernist movement, of difficulty, and of rule-bending literature. As is perhaps to be expected, the reading history of *Tender Buttons* has been unique, interesting, and sometimes good for a laugh. Its critical history, however, has been almost predictable in some respects, since nearly all responses to the work – both critical and less-than-critical – have focused on Stein's life and/or intentions.

This project outlines some of these responses to *Tender Buttons*, focusing on those that emphasize Stein's centrality to the work. As such, a large part of this project comprises a critical and reception history. Choosing to focus on reception history rather than interpretation has its limitations. For one, this focus allows less space for actual interaction with the text and thus runs the risk of pulling farther away from it, when the goal is to move in closer. For *Tender Buttons*, however, this focus on reception history is highly appropriate. Nearly every response to the work has conflated Stein with her text in an attempt to either construct interpretations or make value judgments

about the work and its position in modernist art and literature. This is a trend that has not been examined and is too wide spread and too much a part of the text's reputation, use, value, and pedagogical approaches to remain unexamined. Stein has come to define the work, and, at times, the opposite has been true. Stein and her text have been so intertwined that *Tender Buttons* is now understood to make little to no sense on its own.

As an example of just how much Stein's reputation has overshadowed *Tender Buttons*, I offer a brief anecdote. An acquaintance who graduated with a major in English over fifteen years ago asked me what I was researching for my thesis, and I explained that I was researching the criticism of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. Her reply was that it would have been fascinating to sit in on one of Stein's parlor chats – don't you think? And wasn't she the one who lived with a woman? This acquaintance had no memory of *Tender Buttons*, but remembered Gertrude Stein immediately, and what a fascinating life she lived. Though recent criticism addresses the text of *Tender Buttons* much more intimately, most recent Stein scholars share this acquaintance's relationship with Stein. Reading interpretations of any of Stein's texts often feels like reading an intelligent exposé on Stein's life. The fascination still remains, largely, with the rotund, masculine woman who had tea with Picasso and shared her Paris home with a woman lover.

The way in which *Tender Buttons* has been read and interpreted has limited its scope and secured its position as a difficult text that is accessible only through guides or experts – or biographical information. In the most

extreme cases, responses to *Tender Buttons* have replaced the text with Stein, making it into something that is only interesting by reputation. These two extremes (engaging with the text as something difficult and disregarding it as an accessory) are both only marginally helpful. *Tender Buttons* may be difficult, for example, because it departs from standard literary and written forms and conventions, but it does not completely sever from sense, or defy the written medium. And, contrary to several arguments made in the late twentieth century, *Tender Buttons* is not difficult because it insists on communicating straight-forward, fully-determined images or messages in a round-about, cryptic, puzzling way. *Tender Buttons* is not a challenging puzzle that needs to be solved. And so long as critics insist on this notion, the work will remain limited, and approaches to it will always fall short of complete sense and cohesion. Most importantly for reading practices, the text will always be confrontational rather than invitational.

My project works to undo this widely accepted truism that the work is confrontational – that readers need to fight back to get anything out of *Tender Buttons*. Though this project does not focus primarily on improving readability, my emphasis on what has and has not worked in past responses to the work does reveal that the text is least fruitful when approached as a puzzle or a challenge – a veiled message or a wild experiment meant to frustrate.

Since the earliest and most recent responses to *Tender Buttons* presented together provide an abridged reading history that focuses on where we have come from and where we are now (what has and has not changed),

these two periods in the text's reception history form the backbone of this project. Together, they clearly demonstrate that using Stein to form interpretations of *Tender Buttons* is more of an old habit than a useful strategy. I have chosen to omit the middle period between early and recent criticism because it mostly presents critical strategies that either completely reflect, or partially draw from, both early and late criticism. Also, I felt it was important to focus on what the reception history of *Tender Buttons* has to say about future approaches to the work rather than on presenting a complete history. By looking at what has come before, and pointing out the implicit assumptions that have carried through since the first publication of *Tender Buttons* and subsequent responses in 1914, I attempt to push Stein scholarship further and break unhelpful patterns.

Some approaches to *Tender Buttons* have been helpful – at least in part. As such, constructing a broad-sweeping view of the work's reception history puts my project at risk for unfair generalization and oversimplification; this is especially true since I have chosen to omit criticism from the nineteen forties, fifties, and sixties. And, focusing on the critical history of *Tender Buttons* with a particular eye to problems threatens to break down a tradition that has existed for nearly a century to no productive avail. However, this project does not simply point out problems, but also begins to solve the problems that clearly arise out of the work's narrative of reception. Every effort is made to maintain subtlety. After reading several responses from various decades, moreover, some methods and approaches do merit a

certain level of generalization. When the critical history of *Tender Buttons* is examined, the continuing, prominent emphasis on Stein's life, acquaintances, education, and close relationships is irrefutable.

My project begins at the beginning, chronicling the first responses to *Tender Buttons* from its initial reception to the late nineteen-thirties. In this first chapter, I analyze general response trends by looking at specific press clippings from Stein's private collection. I examine how and why Stein was initially conflated with her text in order to discover what has been carried over into recent scholarship and in order to better understand the work's critical legacy of conflation. This chapter addresses the ways in which early criticism conflated *Tender Buttons* with Stein in terms of celebrity, cubism, cultural capital, and the larger modernist movement. This chapter situates the work within its cultural moment while focusing on what was unique about *Tender Buttons*'s reception and reading public.

My second chapter looks at criticism of *Tender Buttons* from the nineteen-seventies to the present, explaining general trends through specific examples, and evaluating the helpfulness of various (though rather similar) methods. This chapter focuses primarily on criticism that has transposed Stein's personal life onto the work. In particular, I examine criticism that has emphasized Stein's homosexuality, personal history, and gender as relevant sources of interpretation – emphases that I feel have been particularly detrimental to the work's interpretive possibilities and that have most blatantly conflated Stein's life and text. In order to create a broader picture

and thus a more thorough understanding of the critical history of *Tender Buttons*, this chapter also briefly addresses recent criticism that has focused on Stein's cubist ties and education, particularly her affiliation with William James. I argue that, though these concentrations may seem to have more to do with art or psychology, they actually constitute different confluences of Stein and *Tender Buttons*.

My third chapter works to find more productive and enjoyable approaches to *Tender Buttons* by looking at Stein's own writings about writing and art from her 1946 "Transatlantic Interview," *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and *Everybody's Autobiography*. Building on the reception history explored in chapters 1 and 2, and adding a more focused examination of Stein's stated intentions and opinions, the text of *Tender Buttons* itself, and a brief encounter with intention theory, this chapter argues that *Tender Buttons* does not and cannot mean in traditional ways. Critics have wanted the work to communicate via narrative, imagery, theme, or metaphor since 1914, and this desire has frustrated interpretations ever since. This chapter explains the way in which these attempts have denied some of the most fundamental properties of the work, and explores new ways to approach the text that are truer to its defining principles.

In the conclusion, I practice what I preach, interacting with excerpts from *Tender Buttons* to demonstrate how the arguments made in chapter 3 can be practically applied. I also return to some of the basic problems this project has faced and what I have done to solve them. By building on the

text's reception history to find more productive ways of approaching *Tender Buttons*, this project breathes new life into the text and humbly contributes to larger questions of how to approach difficult literature and literature that has been defined by its author. This study touches on issues of intention, modernism, celebrity, and reception, and confronts the otherness and openness of language, while remaining focused on finding new interpretive strategies for *Tender Buttons*.

CHAPTER 2
FIGURING STEIN TO FIGURE IT OUT:
EARLY RESPONSES TO *TENDER BUTTONS*

Examining how and why Gertrude Stein and *Tender Buttons* became inseparably connected is the first step to loosening this connection. The most basic explanation for the tie between Stein and her text is the text's incomprehensibility and the reader's search for meaning. Unlike later criticism of *Tender Buttons*, however, that places Stein at the center of meaning in the text, early criticism is less concerned with the meaning of the text and more concerned with what it stands for in the larger cultural climate. As Leonard Diepeveen argues, "the strength and purpose" of the early responses to *Tender Buttons* "did not lie in providing close readings, but in turning *Tender Buttons* into an event" ("Newspaper Response" 201). By turning the publication and growing popularity of *Tender Buttons* into an event, responses became "focus[ed] on the social and biographical conditions that made such a text possible to be written and garner such attention" (201). Responders wondered, in the first place, why such a text would be published, and secondly, as its fame increased and favorable critiques and defenses of the work and author mounted, they wondered why such a ridiculous text was such a big deal.

As a result, the life of the author, Gertrude Stein, became a large focus in the early responses to *Tender Buttons*: her writing process, where she lived, what she looked like, whom she associated with, etc. The event status of

Tender Buttons made both Stein and her work into more than author and text. They were propelled into celebrity, making them larger than life, and turning them into symbols, examples, and representatives. Rather than existing only as a real person and a real object, Stein and *Tender Buttons* came to stand in for explanations of one another, and ultimately came to stand in for larger arguments about the entire new movement in visual art, music, literature, and dance.

Difficult, fashionable writing like *Tender Buttons* was indicative not only of a particular kind of art, but of an exclusive group. And as Diepeveen explains, outsiders were skeptical of this group, in part, because “they believed that difficult writers were not honest and lonely artists, creating splendid, pure works of self-expression,” but, rather, “difficult writers were part of a *movement*” (*Difficulties* 20, italics original). Writers like Stein were contributing to a trend, and their work was thus not particularly valuable on its own.¹ Also, the artists in this group were generally of more interest to the public than their art; their art was interesting insofar as it was an example of how ridiculous or widespread or innovative the larger movement was. When early responses discuss Stein more than the actual features of *Tender Buttons*, they emphasize celebrity and fashion, and they also dismiss *Tender Buttons* as a work that is beyond the acceptable limit of difficulty. Stein and her text

¹ Though the value of a work is impossible to fully determine, the dominant opinion, according to the published responses and later analyses I draw from, seems to be that works like *Tender Buttons* had no inherent value. Even supporters of *Tender Buttons* stressed Stein’s contribution to art in general, more than the value of the work as a piece of art.

are conflated in early criticism not so much because the critics want to better understand the text, but because Stein and her poetry are part of a wide-spread conflation of all difficult works into one large, but exclusive, coterie – one that is interesting because of its radical nature and because it is the latest fashion.

Emphasis on Stein and her celebrity could take the place of interpreting *Tender Buttons* not only because *Tender Buttons* was considered difficult, but also because being familiar with current literature (difficult or no) was part of maintaining cultural capital. As Timothy W. Galow explains, “educated middle-class readers who were anxious about remaining ‘current’ could potentially reap social benefits by knowing about the currently fashionable literary titles rather than actually reading them” (“Literary Modernism” 319). Galow further explains that “similarly, authorial personae functioned as an important site of knowledge production that could ultimately displace the texts upon which a writer’s fame supposedly rested” (319). In the case of *Tender Buttons*, however, the text was not displaced by Stein, but was rather an opportunity to discuss Stein, and to discuss the movement that she was perceived to be a part of. Stein, herself, became a readable text, and *Tender Buttons* was an extension of that text.

Aaron Jaffe’s discussion of the imprimatur helps clarify the relationship between Stein and *Tender Buttons*, as well. Jaffe clarifies his use of the term “imprimatur” by explaining it as the sense in which “the modernist literary object bears the stylistic stamp of its producer prominently”

(*Modernism* 20). In other words, the artist's reputation, quirks, cultural capital, and marketed persona are stamped onto the literature he or she produces; one is thus virtually inseparable from the other. Jaffe goes on to explain that "at once as a distinctive mark and a sanctioning impression, the imprimatur...turns the author into a formal artifact, fusing the text as a reified signature of value" (20). The author's recognizable traits and established status turn her persona into a stable mark of value that can be fused with the text to increase its value. In the case of *Tender Buttons*, Stein was perceived to have value as cultural capital, and so her text did as well. However, *Tender Buttons* was not simply accepted because it was written by the genius, Gertrude Stein. Her celebrity status or genius status did not become a stable mark of *value*. Rather, *Tender Buttons* was *interesting* because it was written by Stein – a written spectacle that attached itself to its maker and could serve as shorthand for discussing Stein and discussing the new art.

What is interesting about criticism of *Tender Buttons*, however, is that the convenient conflation of Stein, *Tender Buttons*, and the cubist or futurist² movement that served its purpose in the modern period still exists today, in an altered form. Recent criticism is much more concerned with actually understanding the text, and its methods are far more sophisticated, but the focus on Stein remains. In this chapter, I examine Stein's presence in early criticism of *Tender Buttons* in order to better understand Stein's continuing presence in her work, and to lead to more helpful approaches to reading

² These terms were used interchangeably for the most part in early responses to *Tender Buttons*.

Tender Buttons. I look at these early responses in order to grasp the relationship that still exists between Stein and *Tender Buttons*, in hopes of liberating the text from the aura of its creator to whatever degree is most useful.

The first step to achieving this liberation is understanding why Stein and *Tender Buttons* were conflated in the first place. One reason criticism of *Tender Buttons* has centered itself on Stein from the very beginning is that the text is not meaningful in any immediately recognizable way. The miniature poem titled “Salad,” for example, reads: “It is a winning cake” (68). The lack of traditional sense here is fairly obvious. Though some lines in *Tender Buttons* tempt readers to read them literally, such as “Sugar is not a vegetable,” from “A Substance in a Cushion,” the overwhelming presence of indirect association and mind-boggling pairings of words like “salad” and “winning cake,” for example, ensure that the poem falls into nonsense if it is read in the hopes of finding any kind of traditional communication.

Setting cultural climate aside for the moment, the features of the work *itself* draw the reader outward instead of inward, in search of the guide or key that is not inherently present in the work. Without a reliable compass, critics search beyond the text for a recognizable way to interact with it. Several early reviews turned their attention to Stein because they were unsure how to address the text, other than to suggest that it was difficult or impossible to understand. Whether or not these suggestions were simply meant to dismiss the text, they nevertheless point to the inherent features of the work that make

it difficult to interpret on its own. *Tender Buttons*, as I will explain further in chapter 3, tempts, but ultimately eludes, representation and real-world sense. As several early critics note in satiric jabs at Stein's strange style, her genre of language is useless in the real world. Her writing is about as practical as a futurist-inspired suit with twinkling lights, and fails to communicate clearly and effectively.³ Likewise, *Tender Buttons* only partially relates to the outside world. It uses familiar words, but does not use them in familiar ways ("A Substance in a Cushion"?). It simply does not make sense as traditional communication.

Early critics tried to understand, if not the text itself (which hardly any critics actually attempted), then the prominence of the text. Charles Ashleigh, for example, writing for the *Chicago Evening Post* on August 7, 1914, draws attention to Stein's association with William James in an attempt to explain possible influences on the text, and the method to the madness of *Tender Buttons*:

It is said that the author was an able assistant in psychological research to the late Professor James and that she was specially engaged in the study of the idea associations. It may be, therefore, that this seemingly incomprehensible jumble of words has for the

³ Responses to Stein such as "Our Own Polo Guide: The Game Explained According to Gertrude Stein" (June 13, 1914) and commentaries on the futurist movement in general, such as "Futurist Man's Dress to Be a One-Piece Suit With One Button and Twinkling in Color" (July 9, 1914) draw attention to the way in which such language and aesthetic principles do not fit in the real world, and are therefore ridiculous.

writer certain meanings, through association, which are replete with solemn interest – this I am unable to deny or affirm. (“Steinese” 21)

Looking to Stein’s past, this writer suggests that perhaps *Tender Buttons* is not mad because Stein is not – that perhaps she is simply working with principles beyond the knowledge of the average reader. The door swings both ways, however. This writer seems rather disingenuous in his search for understanding. He refers to her text as a “seemingly incomprehensible jumble of words,” and ends with the disclaimer: “this I am unable to deny or affirm” (21). The description of the work’s perceived status as a “jumble of words” is not made up for in this article by Stein’s association with James. Even if it were, the statement, “this I am unable to deny or affirm” dismisses the suggestion. Further, the qualification “for the reader” makes it clear that even if Stein were using some design, it would still have meaning only for her. It would still be self-indulgent.

The implication of such a statement is that self-indulgent work does not invite connection with its reader. Instead, a self-indulgent text is impersonal, and therefore valueless. Since *Tender Buttons* was often seen as more of a stunt (event) than a work of art, or as something too far beyond sense to even approach it, Stein, the celebrity, was often emphasized over her art. An article published in the *New York City Press* on June 7, 1914 admits outright that it turns to Stein in lieu of examining the text as an individual, valuable work of art. “Gertrude Stein has had her first book issued by a real publisher,” the article explains, “and so we feel this is a timely occasion to

tell our readers something about Gertrude in view of the fact that we do not know what her book is all about” (“New Books”). The *Press* article goes on to explain that they “have heard a variety of reasons advanced for putting words together the way Miss Stein does, but as [they] could make no more of them than [they] can of Miss Stein’s text [they] will pass them by.” This response makes *Tender Buttons* and the critical discussion surrounding it seem completely useless – certainly meaningless. And Stein’s artistic output is a bit of a joke. Stein, and her contribution to the movement, however, is explicable.

This writer places more emphasis on Stein than her text, saying “if you wish to know what this latest author looks like,” he can describe her. Stein is only the “latest” new fad, and though the text is unavailable for interpretation, Stein’s physical self is. Her personal description is interesting as a tabloid-esque introduction to the next new celebrity among the cultural elite. Leaving the text and its criticisms alone entirely, the article instead gives a detailed physical description of Stein, saying that

she is a tall, handsome, stout woman who always wears a brown velveteen costume cut low around the neck, which costume is ornamented solely by a narrow white collar and is uncinctured. She has beautiful feet and she usually shows them in sandals without any stockings. (“New Books”)

I quote the description in full because it demonstrates this writer's attitude toward Stein and her work – an attitude repeatedly enforced by several other columnists at the time.

This attitude was partly fueled by a desire to make the culturally elite seem less sacred and significant and more like superfluous spectacles. The above description makes Stein sound harmless; it deflects attention away from the unruly, frustrating text to the funny cartoon character who wrote it. The description is detailed, painting a distinct portrait – a recognizable caricature. In her unusualness she is a stock character who “always” dresses the same way, and goes with bare feet when others wear stockings. Strangely, the description also makes Stein sound like a more beautiful woman than most thought her to be. Stein is turned into a celebrity, someone who is alluring because of her habits, associations, and appearance, and this celebrity status meant that *Tender Buttons* was often simply a part of the shock value.

Similarly, though less tactfully, an anonymous writer for the *New York City Call* on June 7, 1914 makes the text and its creator seem less threatening by comparing the writing process for *Tender Buttons* to “‘Wort-salad,’ a style particularly cultivated by crazy people” (“Gertrude Stein” 15). He also compares it to playing at the planchette or Ouija board (particularly to the way in which these games “with a little coaxing and petting . . . could sometimes be made to spell out something approximating the intelligible”), and to the professors from *Gulliver's Travels* who use “a wheel that stopped at certain letters, which were then handed out in the name of profound

learning” (16). The charge here is, of course, that *Tender Buttons* is a collage of meaningless words that acquire meaning only with wishful thinking; they are trying to be passed off as profound, when they are decidedly not.

Ultimately, however, the work is (mostly) harmless play – an extension of Stein’s celebrity.

Tender Buttons is passed off as a silly sort of game, and its author is described in order to make the work seem all the more harmless, and all the more a part of some larger movement that can be dismissed en masse as silly. “If you have ever done any or all of these things,” he ends by saying, in reference to the Ouija board, etc., “you will enjoy *Tender Buttons*. Miss Stein,” he continues, “as she has been seen in Paris, is described as a mountainous lady, wearing a voluminous (necessarily voluminous) monkish robe of brown, roped – where the waist should be – with a cord. On her feet she wears carpet slippers” (16). Stein is mountainous and her “robe” is “necessarily voluminous,” which emphasizes both her status as a prominent figure in the cubist circle, and her physical size, which makes her into a bit of a joke. These kinds of larger-than-life descriptions of Stein highlight both her elevated status and the writers’ attempts to deflate the importance of that status.

As well as deflating the presumed value and importance of high artists, these writers create a graspable character who is familiar enough to comprehend, but still fascinatingly bizarre. She becomes a celebrity, but one who is amusing and entertaining rather than threateningly powerful and

beyond the reach of the larger public.⁴ In the second article, Stein is part of a religious circle, which makes her art optional; it belongs to a particular sect.⁵ Stein is a caricature of the cubist writer, and part of a system of artistic principles (difficulty being the main one for most critics) that were more easily understood than the art itself. Readers of *Tender Buttons* may not have understood what the text *meant* but they could certainly understand what it stood for, and how it related to the larger movement. Stein, too, was enigmatic, but her image as an unusual artist who lived just beyond reality in the world of high art was immediately comprehensible. Ultimately, references to Stein's appearance and acquaintances were used to tell the kind of narrative that *Tender Buttons* could not.

As Laura Bast has argues in an unpublished article, early readers of *Tender Buttons* looked to Stein the person to experience the kind of subjective relationship that they expect from a text. But as Patrocínio Schweickart argues, “there is actually only one subjectivity at work in reading – that of the reader,” and “the text screens the reader from contact with any subjectivity but her own” (“Understanding an Other” 11). Readers are never

⁴ Because Stein did possess a threatening sort of power (due to her unconventional art and unconventional gender coupled with her increasing notoriety), these kinds of caricature-like approaches to Stein and her work acknowledge Stein's prominence but also seek to undercut it.

⁵ And as Diepeveen explains of difficult literature in general, “the first thing suspicious readers noted was that while difficulty might be fashionable in *modernism*, it was not characteristic of *all* twentieth-century writing. Rather, they commented, difficulty was a school, a coterie, or perhaps even, as Eastman and others suggested, a cult” (*Difficulties* 19, italics original).

really interacting with the author's subjectivity, but with a text. However, readers feel more comfortable interacting with a subject than an object, as Bast argues, and so impose the subjective onto the art object in order to interact with it more comfortably. The above-quoted writer for the New York *City Press* goes farther than this, however, and makes the subjective author stand in for not only the missing subject in the work, but for meaning altogether. Stein is the best explanation the writer can offer for the otherwise meaningless text. Unlike the more recent critics, however, who use information about Stein's life to perform close readings, this kind of response uses Stein to demonstrate larger critical principles and the larger cultural climate. The writer can make sense neither of the work, nor criticism of the work, and while the author is more accessible, she is presented as a kind of caricature.

Stein's caricatured celebrity could be easily associated with the larger cubist movement. And many reviews immediately following the work's publication took the work as a sign of the times. When early critics emphasized Stein's alignment with the cubist movement, they stripped *Tender Buttons* of its status as an individual work of art and made it part of an overall stunt. *Tender Buttons* was seen to many as an inevitable step for futurism to take, and Stein was perceived as a contributor to that movement. On June 11, 1914, the Detroit *Free Press* laments that "it was to be expected that the futurists, having ceased to dismay us with their art, and having foisted their primary colors upon us in the outré fashions of the moment, would

address themselves to literature,” adding that “Gertrude Stein has perpetrated the latest Cubist joke” (“Futurist Literature”). Similarly, in the June 13 Pittsburgh *North American* in 1914, an anonymous writer argues that “approval or acceptance of varied forms of novelty in art and entertainment is followed naturally by kindred efforts in literature, designed to fortify the new points of view” (“Gertrude Stein as Literary Cubist”). In this view, Stein is interested in perpetuating the acceptance of novelty in art. Her work, therefore, can be dismissed as a personal effort on the part of Stein to support a point of view, to make waves and maintain interest. For skeptics of the movement, especially, *Tender Buttons* was more about Stein and her coterie than the actual text. Her art, as responders like Don Marquis would suggest, was founded on newness, rather than artistic achievement.

As Marquis’s Hermione, “a Modern Young Woman,” suggests in *The New York Sun* on October 13, 1914, Stein is “a Pioneer. And with all Pioneers – don’t you think? – the Reach is greater than the grasp” (“Thoughts of Hermione” 236). Hermione ponders that “in the New-Art one doesn’t have to mean things, does one?” (237). *Tender Buttons* is the work of a pioneer, and is meaningless without that qualification. Even with it, it is meaningless, but without it, it is also pointless. What is “wonderful” about *Tender Buttons* is its newness, its attempts to do more than has ever been done before in literature (236). The pioneering artist, then, is more interesting than the art itself. She is making an attempt at something great, even if the work itself is not great. In this way, Stein becomes attached to *Tender Buttons* through the negative

understanding that *Tender Buttons* is famous and popular because of Stein's contribution to the increasing futurist fad.

An anonymous writer for the *Cleveland Leader* writes in response to *Tender Buttons* on June 12, 1914 that "the Futurists in literature are with us" ("And She Triumphed" 159). Another anonymous writer for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, writes in 1914 that "Gertrude Stein is to literature what the Cubists are to art, maybe worse than that," explaining that

she writes crazily about everything and nothing, all jumbled in a scramble of meaningless words. For nouns she misuses adjectives and vice versa, and obeys no rules of composition. With her you are on unknown seas without a pilot. She casts away every vestige of intelligibility and hopes the reader will find a new intelligibility in her madness. She is the most talked about creature in the intellectual world today, and is either a genius or – or something else. (*Dispatch*)

The writer cannot tell what Stein is, but he knows she is famous, and he knows that she is connected to the general cubist movement. The writer's assertion that Stein "is to literature what the Cubists and Futurists are to art" establishes Stein as a symbol of the new and diminishes her position as an individual author. Stein and her work represent the newest wave of futurism, and this writer's addition that Stein is "maybe worse" than the cubist and futurist painters hails the coming of even more outrageous advances in the cult of the new. He also makes Stein sound like a vain artist who pays no

attention to her audience, claiming that she is carefree in her writing process (casting off all rules), and “hopes the reader will find a new intelligibility in her madness.” Under this assumption, one can imagine a self-consumed artist presenting meaningless words to the public while enjoying the fame and prestige the work buys her from the pseudo-intellectual fools who think it genius.

Part of the public’s⁶ concern with what they referred to as futurism and cubism (very inclusive descriptions at this point) is dismay over self-indulgent fashion in place of beautiful, sincere art. Richard Burton, writing for the *Minneapolis (Minnesota) Bellman* on October 17, 1914, claims of *Tender Buttons* that “there would be no object in drawing attention to writing like this, which belongs nowhere but in a madhouse, were it not for the rather alarming amount of space and examination given its maker” (“Posing” 163). The text, then, is an extension of Stein’s celebrity and thus a cog in the futurist machine. Further, the odd text leads critics like Burton to wonder about its creator. “It is perfectly safe to say,” he goes on, “that this writer, willing to get a bizarre reputation in such fashion as she has, is one of two things: unbalanced, or self-consciously a *poseur* who laughs in her sleeve at the ease with which she fools misguided enthusiasts” (164, italics original). There is no option presented here that allows Stein to be a “serious” artist or

⁶ Here and elsewhere, “public” refers to readers of little magazines and those who followed artistic trends and advancements (either casually or intently) through written media, such as newspaper articles.

for *Tender Buttons* to be a work of art. Both are either mad or disingenuous. Both are collapsed into a single symbolic overture.

As seen in the above quotation, one way in which critics used Stein to discuss her text, or to discuss Stein in place of her text, was to turn to the mad/fraud/genius debate (whether they took a strong position or not). Several critics felt the need to reconcile Stein's education, intelligence, and popularity or prominence with her incomprehensible writing. A piece by Robert Emons Rogers, published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on July 11, 1914, demonstrates this kind of discussion about Stein and *Tender Buttons*. "Now the first thing to say," he begins,

– and most people say it – is that the woman is either a colossal charlatan or mad. But there is something else to know about her. She is a doctor of medicine and a doctor of philosophy, a brilliant scholar formerly at Johns Hopkins and Radcliffe and a student in whom William James took great interest and for whom he has prophesied a brilliant future. Furthermore, she is widely known in Europe and one of the foci of the futurist circles in Paris, where she lives. She had already done work thought remarkable, in the more usual fields of literary expression, before she turned to her 'new manner.' ("New Outbreaks" 18-19)

Understanding Stein's work as part of a trend that seeks to produce unorthodox effects helps Rogers make sense of the "mad" text, *Tender*

Buttons (18). He also looks to her qualifications as an intellectual and a writer to try to understand the prominent position that *Tender Buttons* holds in the public – or the fact that it was published at all, and with such fanfare, by Claire Marie. Rogers goes on, after discussing Donald Evans, to say that his newspaper piece “is not a defense of these writers, nor of their conceptions. It is not even an explanation” (20). Rather, “it is a primer from which the reader may go on to link up these people and see that all their ideas . . . are all founded on some first principle and are tending in the same general direction” (20). Anarchic writers like Gertrude Stein can be explained in this instance by their affiliation with a group.

Likewise, Stein’s affiliation with a group made her work representative of that group. The publication of *Tender Buttons* was used as an opportunity to attack the contemporary art world in general. Burton opens the article by asking, “Was there ever in the known history of man a time when the faker and *poseur* had as good a chance as he has today? Or *she* has, for I am thinking of a woman? I think not” (163, italics original). Stein and *Tender Buttons* become synonymous with one another and with the lamentable direction art is taking. “The feature that remains reprehensible, even alarming,” Burton asserts, “is the readiness of our time to accept and foist into the publicity which is as the very breath of their nostrils, the posturings and mouthings of the Stein *genre*” (165, italics original). The word “genre” indicates that *Tender Buttons* is not an isolated incident, but part of a movement. It is representative of a certain style that, to this writer’s dismay,

seems to be growing in popularity – or, at least, in notoriety. And it is a style that is immediately recognizable.

Stein’s work, as described here (and indirectly in several other clippings that mention Stein), is not an isolated incident, but a genre, and she is the figurehead for that genre. According to a publication from Chicago, Illinois, “Miss Stein, an affluent American resident in Paris, has been for years the high priestess of the new artists, Cubists and Futurists, and her home is an amazing museum of their baffling output” (“Public Gets a Peep”). Stein, therefore, is not only a member of the club, but symbolic of all that it stands for, and the point at which all other cubist art collides. Her home here represents the meeting of like-minded works of art. Stein is both religious leader and collector. She and her museum of “baffling” art stand in for the whole movement. It is humorous, but also threatening in its exclusivity (the small, private home of the priestess herself) and its silliness.

Critics of *Tender Buttons* were able to dismiss the text as part of a movement – one among a string of unnecessarily difficult texts. Stein, however, captivated the public, and as much as her critics were disapproving of Stein’s literature, they loved to write about Stein. They could not quite figure her out, but they knew that she was important, whether this status was deserved or not. Stein was the leader of the cult in some ways, and less easy to ignore. As Bennett Cerf notes in 1942, years after *Tender Buttons* was first published and the initial response had calmed, “scarcely a day goes by at our office but somebody writes in to inquire about the safety and whereabouts of

Gertrude Stein and her lifelong companion, Alice B. Toklas” (“Trade Winds” 226). He explains that “not many people even claim to understand the intricacies of Miss Stein’s prose style, but millions admire her rugged and magnificent personality” (226). Though Stein’s works that followed *Tender Buttons* were no more appreciated or understood than *Tender Buttons* (with the exception of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*), the public remained fascinated by this woman who seemed larger than life. As Galow aptly argues,

this bold and mysterious woman who had long been a topic of conversation in the American press, gaining such nicknames as the Mama of Dada, Mother Goose of Montparnasse, the high-priestess of the Left Bank, the Mother of Modernism, and the queen bee of the expatriate hive, had managed to generate a significant amount of interest in her [public] appearances without drawing audiences to her ideas. (“Literary Modernism” 319)

Stein, herself, in connection with her work and celebrity, rather than her literature, was popular. As Stein noted, the crowds that gathered for her lectures years later were there because of her reputation, her scandalous writing, rather than for love of her literature. As Stein explained to Harcourt in New York, “this extraordinary welcome that I am having does not come from the books of mine that they do understand like the *Autobiography* but the books of mine that they did not understand” (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 8). Stein and *Tender Buttons*, and Stein and her other difficult works, were viewed as one celebrity package.

Stein was a celebrity, a cultural artifact, and was almost beyond reality, unable to fit into a comfortably closed category; she did not even seem to fit perfectly into her own movement, but was somehow beyond it, and somehow kept everyone constantly guessing. Her status as artifact, and her work's status as symbol or accessory were attempts to caricature Stein that did not quite hold. One rather humorous though heavy-handed article written by F.H. Young in 1929, exclaims: "We have never been able to understand just what sort of game Gertrude Stein tries to play with words. For the sake of convenience in approaching the subject we here refer to Gertrude Stein as if she were a real person" ("Topics of the Day"). Following these sorts of speculations, the writer (and it is difficult to tell at this point whether he is being facetious) asks, "what if this whole Stein business were a gigantic hoax?" The writer's position, though strange, represents some of the main anxieties of Stein's public. "Personally," the writer continues,

we would not venture to say whether Gertrude Stein is a reality or only a myth. We have no definite knowledge that would warrant any assertion one way or the other. Our actual knowledge on many subjects is just as thin as that. It is a habit to talk about the Equator, but all we ever have heard or read about it is mere talk, and we have never yet seen a person who has actually seen it, although there are many who claim to have crossed it. In the same way, we have read much about Gertrude Stein, but we have never seen one of her books, or met a person who has seen her or read one of her books. We are

forced to accept the lady on faith, as we accept much else in life, but it is well to state that ours is a wavering faith.

Stein is so far from the real world, and presumably higher above it, if you ask her supporters, that the “we” of the article is unable to judge much of anything about Stein. She is a persona, perpetuated by the media. She is not the kind of real person that one interacts with, but a kind of myth. She is a myth because she represents certain values, but also because of the media’s constant emphasis on her and her text as one strange, famous package. She and her text are both inaccessible to the everyday reader, except through mediation.

This mediation, though sometimes having a humanizing effect, as in Lewis Gannett’s 1934 description of Gertrude Stein as “a jolly, bright-eyed, wholly natural, likable, laughing human being,” often served to make Stein seem almost as far beyond the real world as her writing. An outrageous article, written by Virginia Hickock for *Profile – the Magazine of Philadelphia* in July, 1934, makes it seem as if Stein makes as little sense in person as she does in her writing. The article begins with Hickock’s imagined arrival at Stein’s home. “I was ushered into the atelier by Alice B. Toklas,” she begins, “who said laughingly: ‘We have no chairs. Gertrude Stein never sits down. You’ll have to stand. It is Gertrude Stein’s way’” (“Tea With Gertrude Stein”). From the very beginning, then, Stein seems quite eccentric, and the eccentricities only increase. Of Toklas’s note about standing, Hickock writes, “this I accepted without surprise. I had read *Tender Buttons*.” There is a

definite correlation here between Stein, the woman, and Stein's *Tender Buttons*. It was difficult for early reviewers to see a separation between artist and art, whether the assumption was that Stein was being fashionable, that she and her artist friends were trying to hoax their audience, or that Stein was simply mad or outrageous as a human being.

Negative or "indifferent" responses to *Tender Buttons*, however, were not the only ones to reference Stein's life in order to make an argument about the text (or to reference Stein to make an argument about cubism). Stein's supporters frequently turned to Stein's affiliation with artists like Picasso to defend her work. In their minds, following an artistic method was a positive indication that the work was art, and was valuable. If nothing else, Stein's past and current associations proved that she was artistically minded (and of sound mind). For her supporters, Stein's oddities were a sign of genius, rather than fraud or incompetence. Mabel Dodge and Carl Van Vechten were two of Stein's most vocal early supporters, and they looked outside the text, to Stein, in order to explain the value of *Tender Buttons*. Mabel Dodge, in particular, highlighted Stein's relationship with the cubist painters to explain the work's purpose and potential beauty.

Dodge's first positive critique of Stein came in 1913, in response to the portrait that Stein had written of her. In this critique, Dodge exclaims that "in a large studio in Paris, hung with paintings by Renoir, Matisse and Picasso, Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint" ("Speculations" 151). Drawing on the same relation between Stein and

contemporary pioneering artists that Stein's detractors and explicators use, Dodge spins the relation in a positive light. Dodge explains that Stein "is impelling language to induce new states of consciousness, and in doing so language becomes with her a creative art rather than a mirror of history" (151). Since Dodge's piece was published in an Armory Show edition of *Arts and Decoration*, the relation between Stein and the artists featured in the show is no doubt meant to increase interest in Stein. But the relation is also an explanation of Stein's odd writing. By relating Stein's work to pre-established artistic philosophies, Dodge tries to make Stein's work familiar, while maintaining that it is different – new. She calls Stein's writing "impressionistic" (151) and compares reading Stein to looking at a Picasso painting; in each case, she encourages the audience not to worry so much about what it means, but to simply experience it.

Carl Van Vechten also compares Stein to contemporary art, and makes a similar argument about how to experience the work. "It is worthy of note," he says, "that almost everyone tries to make sense of Miss Stein just as everyone insists on making photographs out of drawings by Picabia, when the essential of his art is that he is getting away from the photographic" ("How to Read" 158). Stein and Picabia cannot be read in traditional ways. New ways of experiencing and interpreting art must come to light before artists like Stein can be fully appreciated. Despite the title of Van Vechten's article, however, "How to Read Gertrude Stein," Van Vechten does not suggest what this new way may be. Just like indifferent or negative reviews, Van Vechten's

article turns away from the text and instead to Stein and her associations. He presents a defense, not a method.

This defense depends on Stein's reputation. By proving that Stein is a true artist and an intelligent woman, Van Vechten intends to show that her work is true art, and worthy of positive attention and recognition. He, like Dodge, explains Stein's creative process in order to show the artist at work, and hopefully also show her dedication and seriousness. He also describes Stein, the woman. He says that

as a personality Gertrude Stein is unique. She is massive in physique, a Rabelasian woman with a splendid thoughtful face; mind dominating her matter. Her velvet robes, mostly brown, and her carpet slippers associate themselves with her indoor appearance. To go out she belts herself, adds a walking staff, and a trim unmodish turban. This garb suffices for a shopping tour or a box party at the *Opéra*. (155, italics original)

As in other physical descriptions of Stein, her size, velvet robes, and carpet slippers create a striking and unique impression of the woman. But Van Vechten qualifies them with positive descriptors, rather than allowing his audience to think her mad, foolish, or amusing. In his description, she dresses oddly because her "mind dominat[es] her matter" (155). He is also careful to note that she has a "splendid, thoughtful face" (155). This suggestion of intelligence is supported by the following paragraph, in which he explains

that “Paris is her abode. She settled there after Cambridge, and association with William James, Johns Hopkins, and a study of medicine,” adding that “her orderly mind has captured the scientific facts of both psychology and physiology” (155). Presenting information such as this, Van Vechten is able to use his final paragraph to suggest something like an approach to reading *Tender Buttons*, suggesting, like Dodge, to not worry so much about meaning, and to enjoy the “certain sleepy consciousness” that comes with reading the work (155).

From the very beginning, then, Stein was conflated with her text, and her striking persona and alternate lifestyle, along with her position as priestess of the cubists, made her incomprehensible texts fascinating, mostly, because they were written by Stein. And Stein was mostly fascinating because she was priestess of the cubists. As a result, perhaps even more so than other writers or artists of the time, Stein’s work was attached to Stein’s self. As Jaffe explains of the imprimatur, Stein’s personality and reputation were fused with the work, and conversely, the work became a staple of the Stein genre. Both became stable artifacts that could be tied back to the larger movement – stable artifacts whose stability relied on the fame and uniqueness of one another. It is almost as if *Tender Buttons* was an extension of the larger-than-life personality that was Gertrude Stein, whether this was a positive or negative association. It makes sense, then, that readings of *Tender Buttons* would continue to focus on Stein in their approaches to reading and interpreting the poem.

Recent criticism seeks, at times, to move beyond the public persona of Gertrude Stein as priestess of the cubists, and explore the influences of her gender, life, and sexuality, but also remains interested in the cubist principles and social influences that appeared in most early responses to the work. Mostly, recent criticism builds on early connotations of Stein and *Tender Buttons*, but is careful to pay closer attention to the text itself, and focuses more on Stein's personal life and particular artistic philosophy than on Stein as a futurist artist. With an understanding of Stein's initial attachment to the text, it is now necessary to question the helpfulness of this attachment in hopes of appreciating *Tender Buttons* as neither a symbolic caricature, nor a direct reflection of Stein's personal life and professional associations. Necessary to this exploration is an examination of the recent criticism of *Tender Buttons* that perpetuates Stein's conflation with her texts.

CHAPTER 3
WHEN IS A ROSE A ROSE?: RECENT AND CONTEMPORARY
CRITICISM OF *TENDER BUTTONS*

Interacting with Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* has proven a challenge from the outset, particularly for literary critics. William H. Gass argued in 1986 that:

the writings of Gertrude Stein became a challenge to criticism the moment they were composed and they have remained a challenge. This challenge is of the purest and most direct kind. It is wholehearted and complete. It asks for nothing less than a study of the entire basis of our criticism, and it will not be put off. It requires us to consider again the esthetic significance of style; to examine again the ontological status of the artist's construction; to try to fix, if we can, the location of value in the work; to state, once more, the relation between the artist's vision, his medium, and his effect.

("Escape" 114)

Arguably, Gass's call to action has not been answered – at least, not fully. Some of his suggestions, such as attempting to “fix... the location of value in the work” are perhaps not so essential. But Gass calls attention to the ways in which *Tender Buttons* has challenged, and continues to challenge, traditional reading practices. As Gass suggests, *Tender Buttons* calls for its critics to reevaluate the basic questions of literary criticism, such as the importance of style, or whether a work of art is independent of its maker or intrinsically tied.

The rule-breaking nature of the text and its apparent incomprehensibility draw attention yet again to the question of artistic intent: if Stein intended for the work to have a certain effect, if she intended it to be art, is it then art? Should we take the author at her word and try to experience what she meant for us to experience, as Mabel Dodge and Carl Van Vechten suggested early on?

Critics of Gertrude Stein's work are often eager to point out the difficulties posed by reading and interpreting *Tender Buttons*. Markus Poetzsch mentions in a 2006 article, for example, that "the bewilderment experienced by readers of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* has abated little since the book's publication," and he is certainly correct ("Presence" 946). These kinds of overarching statements serve as invitations to take criticism of *Tender Buttons* in a new direction. Since no one has figured it out, virtually any new reading must be helpful; one of us has to get it right, right?

My argument is that criticism, for the most part, has not acknowledged the basic interpretive problems that *Tender Buttons* raises. Rather, criticism of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* has carved for itself a particular kind of criticism that fuses and confuses the divisions between "the artist's vision, . . . medium, and . . . effect" ("Escape" 114), as well as divisions between the artist's self and art. These confusions and conflation are not signs of bad critical practice, but of the unique nature of the poem. In contemporary criticism, the personal connection between Stein and her art builds on previous connections, but is also hugely influenced by burgeoning

feminist criticism in the nineteen seventies and eighties, queer studies, and a general interest in her personal, rather than public, life. Mostly, contemporary criticism, like early reviews of the poem, gropes at some interpretive handle that will make interpretation, or even interaction, possible. Recent criticisms have turned to Stein's gender to form feminist and domestic readings of the work, or used her sexuality to form homoerotic interpretations. Critics attempting to redirect attention from Stein's self to her influences turn to her associations with William James, or cubist painters like Picasso and Cézanne.

Elyse Blankley is one of several critics who argue that *Tender Buttons* is the work of a "verbal anarchist" and that Stein "was artistically shaping a distinctly 'ex-patriate' vision (in the word's original Latin sense of 'away from the father')" – that *Tender Buttons* is the culmination of her attempts to free women from the dominant patriarchal language ("Beyond" 202). Other critics, such as Belinda Bruner, argue that *Tender Buttons* is a snapshot of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's "domestic nesting" ("A Recipe" 418). As Jane Palantini Bowers observes, "many of the interpretive clues in the work have led readers to conclude that *Tender Buttons* is autobiographical, and therefore, by extension, female or feminist, domestic and erotic" (*Gertrude Stein* 86). Many interpretations of *Tender Buttons* begin with impressive insights into the inner workings and intended effects of the text, but base their main conclusions on Stein's self. In doing so, critics are using the unstable biographical figure of Stein to form more traditional readings that are anchored by metaphor, symbolism, and theme.

Since the text itself does not offer such stable systems (which I explore more thoroughly in chapter 3), critics use knowledge of Stein's life to try to unlock the mysteries of the text – to do the text justice by showing that it can be read, enjoyed, and understood based on familiar principles, that there is a method to the madness. The result of this widespread approach is a body of criticism that acknowledges the complexity of *Tender Buttons* and gives intelligent, thorough, and fascinating interpretations. But these interpretations, however beautifully performed and constructed, nevertheless admit a stable connection between Stein's life and art.

A prime example of this kind of sophisticated reading is Margaret Dickie's interpretation, in which she intends to "[Recover] the Repression in Stein's Erotic Poetry." In order to do so, Dickie engages with Stein's interest in the relation between the inside and outside world. Specifically, Dickie argues that "[Stein's] interest in the outside, even the rhythm of the visible world, was also an interest in how much of the inside Stein could make clear to the outside, how much she could come out where the rhythm of the visible world might impede the rhythm of her personality" ("Recovering" 8). This focus on the inside and outside is highly relevant to *Tender Buttons*. It touches on Stein's project as an artist and even addresses Stein's anxiety over letting too much of herself influence her work. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes of herself that "she always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal" (119). Ethel Rackin describes this "torment" as an "interest in the relation between the

‘visible world’ and ‘internal’ life” (*Ornamentation* 117). Dickie’s engagement with this relationship between the inside and outside, alone, is highly relevant to *Tender Buttons*.

This engagement, however, quickly and seamlessly moves into asserting the text’s erotic focus. Dickie argues that Stein was interested in communicating her feelings without really communicating them – a kind of hide and seek peep-show that allowed Stein to express her lesbian desires and experiences while sufficiently concealing them to protect herself and her poem from anti-homosexual or anti-erotic attention. Thus, Dickie assumes a seamless connection between Stein’s sexuality and her work in order to make the poem more accessible – more human. Clearly responding to Marianne DeKoven’s arguments about the poem’s anti-patriarchal sentiments, Dickie argues that

examined in the context of her own development, Stein will appear less interested in freeing language from patriarchal strictures and more concerned with manipulating language to cover up the meaning that might become too explicit for the taboo subject of lesbian eroticism, which was her central concern. (“Recovering” 4)

Dickie argues that Stein’s poetry is not only encoded with lesbian eroticism, but this eroticism is her “central concern.” She argues that Stein is first and foremost an erotic poet. Dickie even goes so far as to argue that Stein hid behind the larger movement she was a part of and thus “fails to take credit for

her real and unique contribution to that period,” which Dickie identifies as “an erotic poetry of considerable variety and power” (4). Though interesting, this argument seems to involve a fair bit of wishful thinking. If Stein’s work really were about erotic concealment, then finally outing Stein’s poetry would be a serious advancement in Stein scholarship, and perhaps a personal favor to Stein; it would also form the basis for a more traditional, approachable reading. But this reading is a bit stretched. Dickie’s analysis looks deeply at specific elements of the text, and pays close attention to its patterns, shifts, and playfulness, but ultimately her conclusion is based on Stein’s personal life, since to argue that the poem is homoerotic only makes sense if the reader knows the poet was a lesbian.

Thus, Dickie’s reading assumes more than can actually be proven, or even unproblematically speculated. The argument assumes that since Stein was a lesbian, she must have felt strange, other, and limited, and so driven to create a language that could express her unique desires while keeping them safe from the rest of the unforgiving world. This seems like a fair assumption in some respects. However, speculating on Stein’s emotions and experiences is not strong enough support for Dickie’s (or any literary critic’s) argument. Dickie’s assumption is that if Stein had not been a lesbian living in a less accepting time, her poetry would be more traditional – that this unique poem was crafted primarily to pave a way for (not herself or her art, but) her *lesbian* self.

This focus on the lesbian self that binds *Tender Buttons* is not unique. As Shari Benstock explains in 1986, contemporary critics argued “that Stein’s language renders meaning if one is familiar with an essentially lesbian code” in response to earlier claims “that Stein’s writing was egotistical silliness” (*Left Bank* 161). Benstock further explains this trend and ventriloquizes that “once the code is broken, meaning spills out, showing the link between word and meaning to be the same as in all literary works” (161). The assertion that Stein’s work is inherently and intentionally erotic anchors it, making it accessible and intentional, rather than silly and completely nonsensical. However, most recent critics of *Tender Buttons* do agree with Benstock’s assertion that “Stein’s writing gives evidence of a move toward the independence of the word from prescribed and coded meanings, a move away from the easy equation of sign and substance” (161). It is a truism in Stein criticism that her work resists traditional signification and meaning. But this has not stopped critics from trying to gather *Tender Buttons* and Stein’s other experimental works into a more traditional understanding and a more traditional reading experience.

Though later critics (1990-present) are more hesitant to pin the work down to a central message (like lesbian eroticism), the search for the poem’s central message, theme, or philosophy continues. Lisa Ruddick argues, for example, that though she and other critics no longer hope to find a single key or code to unlock *Tender Buttons*, and “translate” the poem “into ordinary discourse,” she nevertheless believes that the poem does contain a code – a

code that reveals Stein's early and unlabeled attachments to psychoanalytic feminist theory ("A Rosy Charm" 225). Drawing on a previous analysis by Richard Bridgman, Ruddick argues that the 'image clusters' present in *Tender Buttons* have "sexual associations" (226). She argues that roses "are used to suggest menstrual blood" and that these images are often presented as "shameful or dirty" (226). "In *Tender Buttons*," she suggests, "many of the objects upon which Stein confers a new distinction are bodily stains, tokens of stigmatized femininity" (228).

These stains and tokens, Ruddick suggests, lose their negative stigma in the poem since "Stein restores the perceptual indiscriminacy of the pre-Oedipal phase" (236). She does this, Ruddick argues, by creating such a jumble of words and actions that the reader's attention is dispersed, and the Oedipal center is avoided (236). Further, by turning attention to imagery of the feminine and of the domestic, Stein also draws attention away from the phallus and the father and instead recreates and re-envisions the female anatomy and the mother. In this way, Ruddick argues, Stein makes a feminist argument about patriarchal hierarchies and forces the reader to reconsider inherent value systems that refuse to be honored in *Tender Buttons*. *Tender Buttons* is no doubt interested in re-visioning and directing the reader's attention to new groupings of words. However, asserting that this is done with feminist intentions relies on the stability of both Stein and her gender, and neither of these is stable enough to support the kind of argument Ruddick is making.

Ruddick's overall argument about *Tender Buttons* is that Stein intends to make her readers appreciate the "little things" – more specifically, little things that are usually considered dirty or offensive. "Looking with care," she argues, is what makes ordinarily dirty or obscene images not only inoffensive, but beautiful (227), and Stein's strange use of language that "level[s]...conventional categories" (227) allows the reader to carefully examine generally negative interpretive associations free of traditional hierarchies of value. These hierarchies, it becomes clear, are attributable to patriarchal power structures. In this way, Stein becomes a champion of the feminine, turning dirty menstrual blood into something beautiful and turning mundane domestic imagery into something of high aesthetic value. By tying Stein into the text in this way, Ruddick attaches stable centers of meaning to an otherwise unstable text. The 'image clusters' are no longer arbitrary.

Ruddick's argument is one among several that link Stein's unconventional prose poems to a feminist agenda. Marianne DeKoven, a prominent Stein critic and perhaps the most well-known for her anti-patriarchal arguments, claims that "*Tender Buttons* functions antipatriarchally: as presymbolic *jouissance* and as irreducibly multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning" (*A Different Language* 76-7). Like Ruddick, DeKoven sees *Tender Buttons* as a return to some state before patriarchal signification became natural and unquestioned. This interest in Stein's return to something that does not signify in the way most would expect draws attention back to the poem, and the emphasis on

multiplicity, fragmentation, and an “open-ended articulation of lexical meaning” is a helpful approach to *Tender Buttons*. Likewise, DeKoven’s argument that “there is no need to struggle to interpret or unify either the whole of *Tender Buttons* or any part of it” is spot on.

DeKoven’s argument, however, does what most otherwise helpful readings of *Tender Buttons* do: rather than allowing the poem its fragmentation, multiplicity, and unorthodox use of language, DeKoven comes to the conclusion that the open-endedness in *Tender Buttons* is an attempt to break patriarchal hierarchies inherent in symbolic language. Like most criticisms of *Tender Buttons*, DeKoven’s admits that the text is open-ended, but cites this open-endedness as proof of something decidedly closed, and decidedly reliant on Stein’s self. It is true that *Tender Buttons* cannot be unified, but to assert that this is because Stein intended to challenge patriarchal assumptions is to impose a unity that cannot be concretized based on anything but Stein’s gender or biography.⁷ It is true, as DeKoven states, that “Stein was well aware of what she was doing as a groundbreaking experimental writer” and that “she was eminently a literary theorist as well as a practitioner” (“Modernism and Gender” 186). But it should not be assumed that she was a *feminist* theorist simply because she was an unconventional woman.

⁷ Because the text itself does not support the anti-patriarchal interpretations DeKoven presents, I offer Stein’s gender as the most likely impetus for these arguments. I do not mean to assert DeKoven’s intentions, but rather to demonstrate that the only information that supports this kind of interpretation comes from Stein’s self.

Ruddick and DeKoven are certainly not alone in their feminist readings, however. Marguerite S. Murphy also relies on Stein's gender to form her analysis of *Tender Buttons*. As in most Stein criticism since 1970, much of what she suggests is highly productive, but the urge to incorporate Stein's biography into the basis of interpretation ultimately problematizes her reading. "Where have we heard such words before?" she asks of the vocabulary of *Tender Buttons*. This is a helpful question, since, as several other Stein critics have noted, Stein's chosen vocabulary is decidedly common. But Murphy's conclusion that such words are heard "in the home – in the kitchen and in the parlor, where women sew and where women dress," insists that *Tender Buttons* is less concerned with the ordinary in a general sense, and more concerned with the ordinary life of the *woman*, and the ways in which Stein toys with such commonalities ("Familiar Strangers" 383). "Stein," she argues, "exploits the vocabulary, syntax, rhythms, and cadences of conventional women's prose and talk, the ordinary discourse of domesticity to create her own new 'language'" (383). Like DeKoven, Murphy uses Stein's self to concretize the work's unorthodox use of language.

Murphy argues that "Stein's texts work . . . to reinvest domestic labor with value, to make household tasks into code words for stability in her new domestic arrangement and for erotic lesbian love" (388). Thus, *Tender Buttons* is a product of the limited domestic sphere of women, but also a reimagining of this limited space as a place of value and pleasure. "Stein does defy Victorian precepts of order and decorum," Murphy clarifies, "but not to

debase the domestic sphere, the intimate sphere of women” (388). In Murphy’s reading, Stein is not being anti-patriarchal, as DeKoven argues, but rather embracing the insulated space of the domestic sphere, and embracing her position as a lesbian woman.

The domestic sphere is another common focus in contemporary criticism of *Tender Buttons*. Belinda Bruner’s domestic interpretation of *Tender Buttons* makes fairly direct connections between Stein’s life and art, arguing that “Stein’s most intriguing works [such as *Tender Buttons*] display a domestic and tactile eroticism that results from her relationship with Alice Toklas” (“A Recipe” 418). Bruner asserts that *Tender Buttons* was directly influenced by Stein’s personal life. As evidence, she points out that the poem was written “when Toklas and Stein were falling in love and setting up housekeeping” (417). Bruner argues that “in falling in love with Toklas, Stein falls in love with cups and boxes and drawers and lunch”⁸ (427). She goes on to explain that “as Stein discovers the satisfaction of nesting with Toklas her writing reflects the feminine and mundane through which she sifts her experimental forms of order” (427). The “feminine and mundane,” then,

⁸ Elisabeth A. Frost makes an interesting, but equally problematic argument about Stein’s newfound love of objects, stating that “*Tender Buttons* implements a linguistic strategy that I describe, in light of recent feminist theories, as lesbian fetishism – an anti-Freudian, and anti-Futurist, version of object-love. Stein’s theory of the noun as loved object is the basis for an idiosyncratic avant-garde practice. Stein affirms the erotic charge of words and objects, contesting the presumption of sexual difference propounded in Freud’s writings and in masculinist avant-garde rhetoric” (*The Feminist Avant-Garde* 4).

become the heart and soul of the poem, placing Stein's home life and incidental position as a woman at the locus of interpretation.

Bruner defends these elisions between private artist and public art when she argues that "the form of [*Tender Buttons*] suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between poetry and instruction, between art and life" (428). In making this argument, Bruner suggests that *Tender Buttons* belongs as much to the realm of cooking and making love (to the private home) as it does to the public sphere of the art object and Stein's public persona as an artist and a genius. She argues that "Toklas and Stein saw the physical and intellectual as equally important and sought to incorporate the physical into their writing as opposed to simply writing *about* the physical," as she credits Joyce and Faulkner with doing (419).

Bruner also argues that "the Anarchy of Stein lies in her proposition that the mind is not superior to the body and that intellect and body can coexist meaningfully" (428). She thus believes that *Tender Buttons* represents both Stein's intellect and her physical experience within the domestic space. Readings such as this assume a kind of oneness between mind and body and artist and art that can be quite convincing, particularly in the case of such an unorthodox literary work as *Tender Buttons*, in which traditional reading habits are arguably forfeit. But the difficulty and unorthodoxy of *Tender Buttons* have left it open to wild interpretations that focus on the more easily accessible biography.

Palantini Bowers makes what is likely the most direct association between Stein's domestic world and the world of *Tender Buttons*. She boldly argues that

the world to which *Tender Buttons* refers is indeed a world where women sew, draw, play music, cook, eat, dress up. They wear petticoats and shirt waists; dresses, shoes, and shawls; red hats and blue coats. Adorned with feathers, handkerchiefs, umbrellas and eyeglasses, they take tea and cake from new cups and saucers set out on steady tables; they have oranges and oatmeal for breakfast, lunch on roast beef and potatoes, and eat dinners of stews and soups cooked for them by other women. This is the world of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. (*Gertrude Stein* 86)

Though Bowers argues that objects present in *Tender Buttons* are not mimetic representations, in the above quotation she uses the work's references to familiar objects to create a one-to-one correlation between the world of the poem and the outside world. More specifically, she asserts that there is a direct correlation between the world of *Tender Buttons* and the domestic life of Stein and Toklas. Likewise, Shari Benstock asserts that "in *Tender Buttons* Stein creates a woman's world" and that "she renames and thereby reacquires the objects that surround her, including Alice Toklas, who has now become an object (of love) in this homemade universe" (*Left Bank* 162). *Tender Buttons* is "homemade," like jam, and the world of the poem is the world of Stein, which is precisely Bowers's interpretation.

Ironically, however, Bowers does not want readers to jump to conclusions about the work's 'aboutness.' "Because *Tender Buttons* is so full of interpretive clues," she explains, "many readers, trained by years of symbol hunting, dutifully play detective, beginning with the question 'What is this about?', assembling the various clues into an interpretive system and arriving, finally, at the 'meaning' of the text" (83). Bowers, then, feels that the associations she makes between objects referenced in the poem and objects in the world of Gertrude and Alice are not a result of detective work – that her work does not "[assemble]...various clues into an interpretive system" that searches for "the 'meaning' of the text" (83). Perhaps this is a sign of just how deeply accepted it is that Stein and her domestic life are inherently present in *Tender Buttons*. Bowers does not see a problem with arguing that *Tender Buttons* represents Stein's personal world so long as individual claims for meaning and representation remain suspect. Bowers's unquestioning assertion that *Tender Buttons* inhabits the same space as Stein (in an altered form) requires that she play detective as well, hunting for signs of the domestic, homoerotic space that she longs to see – that, perhaps, she feels she must see.

I do, however, agree with Bowers's assertion that "far from being the unfriendly, unapproachable text that some find it to be, *Tender Buttons* is an extraordinarily intimate text. It is not so much lure and obstacle as invitation and embrace" (104). It does seem true that Stein's poetry is more about invitation than obstacle. Even if this is not the case, it is certainly more

fruitful to read *Tender Buttons* this way, since assuming that it is an obstacle – that it is aggressive – has led to dismissiveness rather than appreciation, as we have seen. And Bowers is correct when she suggests that the poem’s “intimacy does not derive from the fact that it invokes Stein and Toklas’s domestic and erotic life since we can never become full participants in that life” – much as we may try – but that, rather, “its intimacy comes from our being involved directly in the making of the text” (104). However, Stein’s personal life is so much a part of *Tender Buttons* now that Bowers does not seem to feel the need to acknowledge the biographical evidence present in her own argument.

Marjorie Perloff is right to oppose such reliance on presumed stable centers like gender or the domestic. She argues that “perhaps the greatest difficulty Stein’s writing presents to her readers is that it is not finally typical or characteristic of any one thing – neither characteristically ‘feminist’ nor ‘lesbian’ nor ‘expatriate’ nor ‘Jewish’ nor ‘Cubist’ nor ‘American,’ nor even characteristically ‘pre-postmodern’” (*Poetic License* 159). Even the biographical figure of Stein, of the author, “refuses definition” (159). Thus, arguing that *Tender Buttons* is an attempt to celebrate, defy, rescue, or re-envision any one thing is simply too limiting.

The problem with these analyses is not only that they are too limiting, or that they assume a connection between Stein’s private life and her art, but that if Stein happened to be a man, interpretations would be entirely different. Ruddick’s rose (explained above) could just as easily be interpreted as one of

the flowers of rhetoric, for example. This is especially apt since *Tender Buttons* is clearly concerned with the effects of rhetoric and the creation of new rhetorical methods that go against the grain. Readers who are more comfortable with representation than metaphor make claims like Carolyn Faunce Copeland's that "someone is in the presence of a plate of roast beef – that much is certain" (*Language and Time* 83). Truly, *Tender Buttons* is a literary inkblot test. This is because Stein does not tell her readers what to see, nor how to interpret the work. As David R. Jarraway suggests, "in reading Stein...we all find our own quite personal ways of author-izing ourselves" (*Going the Distance* 25). *Tender Buttons* has been a prime target for wishful thinking and personal agendas. This is perhaps true of various other critical endeavors as well (we all have some level of personal investment in literary criticism, and choose certain topics for fairly personal reasons), but it seems to be especially true of criticism of *Tender Buttons*.

In an attempt to move away from readings that focus on Stein's private life, contemporary critics have also looked to Stein's public acquaintances. My focus in this chapter is on readings that rely on Stein's gender and sexuality, since they rely on Stein's life most blatantly and least helpfully. However, some space should be devoted to the other forms of reliance on Stein's self, since they are problematic in their own ways and provide more promising bases from which to introduce new focal points of interpretation besides Stein's biographical existence and presence in the text.

The most commonly noted associations in Stein criticism are between Stein and the cubists – especially friend and peer Pablo Picasso. Contemporary critics as well as early critics have tried to understand Stein’s work by comparing it to what is knowable – to the philosophies and aesthetic principles of early twentieth century painters, for example. Since Stein’s work is not literary in any traditional sense, drawing associations between *Tender Buttons* and another medium is appropriate and potentially very productive. If nothing else, it helps discover boundaries between different media, and in what ways *Tender Buttons* may seek to cross them, or to create new ones by expanding its audience’s notion of literature.

Dana Cairns Watson attempts to take biographical Stein criticism in this direction, focusing on the more general implications of a text like *Tender Buttons*. In doing so, she presents some fascinating and intelligent associations between Jamesian psychology and *Tender Buttons*. Cairns Watson rightly argues that

while Stein is often understood to write differently because of her homosexuality or her womanhood – as lacking a heterocentrist world-view or writing *l’écriture féminine* – James’s discussion of the means by which *human* minds think would have let her see her project as more universal. Stein calls attention to our necessary habits of human thought, not just heterosexual or masculine thought, and makes us question assumptions that so many of us hold so

deeply we haven't noticed them. (*Gertrude Stein and the Essence* 37, italics original)

Cairns Watson shifts focus away from Stein's gender and sexuality to view Stein as an artist and human first, and a woman and lesbian second. This new focus makes the potential impact of *Tender Buttons* much larger, and opens the work up to new possibilities, rather than unnecessarily limiting it to very particular intentions and influences. She suggests that *Tender Buttons* was written to shift perspective – anyone's perspective – based on the knowledge that Stein worked with William James. "James's idea that the mind consists of arrangements, and of arrangements of arrangements, coupled with his assertion that linguistic experience can form these arrangements," Cairns Watson argues, "suggests that Stein's weird series of words might have the capacity to rearrange those arrangements in our minds" (37). She also explains that "James asserts that learning something altogether new is easier than seeing the mundane in new ways," adding that "he may have inspired Stein to try" (41). This interpretation sounds promising. The difficulty with Cairns Watson's interpretation, however, is that it still suggests a direct link between Stein's life and work. Looking at Jamesian psychology is a helpful starting point. Cairns Watson takes it farther than is necessary, however, by making all the pieces fit under one explanation or influence.

Cubist criticism also traces direct influence. Bettina L. Knapp traces Stein's connection to Cézanne, in particular, arguing that his "influence... is primordial" (*Gertrude Stein* 112). She argues that

as he had believed it was more important for the artist to reveal geometric structures hidden behind objects than to delineate the objects concretely, so Stein adopted a similar method with regard to the function of words. Once terms had been pared down to their essentials, the skeleton structure and bone marrow of the word and work could come forth full-blown. (112)

Unfortunately, without knowledge of both Cézanne's work and Stein's association with the artist, this reading would be much less convincing. Knapp's attention to the strange use of words in *Tender Buttons* is quite productive and interesting, but the particular conclusions she makes are only supported by the fact that words are used in strange ways, and the fact that Stein associated with Cézanne. Tracing artistic influence is helpful, but when it is imposed upon the work, rather than found within it, the result is problematic.

To date, this imposition is the most common kind of influence-based criticism of *Tender Buttons*. And, as Neil Schmitz argues, "the influence of Picasso's discoveries, his disavowal of representation in art, is readily apparent in Gertrude Stein's discourse, but this perspective, while it describes the experimental provenance of the text, tends to reduce *Tender Buttons* to the status of an exercise" ("Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist" 119). Though Schmitz's concern over "reducing" the text has its own problems, it is true that tracking the "provenance" of *Tender Buttons* limits its possible interpretations.

Whether the focus of a critic's interpretation is Stein's gender, sexuality, biography, associations, or artistic provenance, the result is always the same. Each of these readings tries to establish interpretive anchors built on the unreliable self of Stein. In the most recent scholarship on *Tender Buttons*, Stein's art is emphasized over her personal life, and possible interpretations blossom; but the personal does tend to creep in. Sara J. Ford agrees that "while the biographical 'subtext' of *Tender Buttons* is important for our overall understanding of the work, it simply cannot explain other issues that are clearly at stake in the text as well" (*Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens* 45). Ford's reading of *Tender Buttons* also addresses Stein's artistic will and expression. She argues that

in *Tender Buttons*, written in 1912 and published two years later, Stein confronts the power of language to determine our experience in the world. The text reflects her belief that consciousness is determined by its relationships, particularly its relationship with language. It also reflects Stein's sense of the importance of artistic will as a force that can bear witness to unnecessarily restrictive constructs of linguistic order and that can create new linguistic forms that might allow for a greater degree of difference and multiplicity. The language of *Tender Buttons* is the performance of a consciousness that is at once determined and determining. (43)

Ford sees the unconventionality of *Tender Buttons* as an exploration of the artist's ability to affect consciousness and thus to challenge "constructs of

linguistic order.” One of Ford’s more insightful contributions is her assertion that “*Tender Buttons* is a staged performance of both language and artistic will” and that it “negotiates the play between complete determination and agency that is enabled by artistic will. Artistic expression,” she argues, “is imagined not as absolute will and control but as a kind of interplay between forces” (45). Using a strikingly Foucauldian lens, Ford presents Stein’s sense of artistic will as a fluctuating power dynamic in which the author is not the ultimate authority, but is rather in dialogue with language and in dialogue with the reader. “Artistic control as modeled in *Tender Buttons*,” she explains, “is...never absolute” and “it is, rather, a kind of ongoing negotiation with the determining powers of language” (52). “I argue,” she says, “that language, according to Stein’s vision is the most immediate and problematic external experience that there is” (45). And since Stein was interested in the relationship between the internal and external, it makes sense that the authorial dynamic in *Tender Buttons* would be complicated. When language is no longer the author’s putty, but a force of its own to be reckoned with, the author has less control. And as Ford argues, this is always the case, but people are not generally aware of it.

Ford’s reading opens *Tender Buttons* up to a wider range of interpretive possibilities and comes close to granting it some level of independence. However, Ford also argues that the homoerotic subtext several scholars have attempted to draw out is definitely present in the text. Her trouble with these readings is that they often search for “a clearly defined answer-key,” and to

apply such a key “to any section of this complex text,” she argues, presents “significant limitations [...] as there is clearly more at stake than merely an intricate layering of metaphors” (46). So while her own assertions are not reliant on the person on Gertrude Stein, and while she finds flaws in some homoerotic scholarship, her study of *Tender Buttons* is unable to fully break from the insistence on Stein’s importance to the work. She is eager to loosen Stein’s grip on *Tender Buttons*, especially with her argument that Stein’s artistic will, even as Stein saw it, is not all-consuming, but Ford falls short of entertaining the idea that *Tender Buttons* may have more to do with artistic philosophy than personal feelings or desires.

Suzanne Zelazo’s reading of *Tender Buttons* also makes important, successful strides toward a more fruitful reading, and even a more enjoyable reading experience. Working from the interpretations of Stimpson and Cope, Zelazo distances herself from these previous somatic readings by maintaining a sensual focus but removing the charged, veiled lesbian desire from the impetus of creation. In Zelazo’s reading, *Tender Buttons* becomes an invitation rather than a challenge, and Stein herself is breaking hierarchies and changing the game. But she is doing so in order to create new experiences, rather than to challenge patriarchal language or to make space for her lesbian voice, as has most often been argued.

Where Zelazo’s reading manages to conform to more predictable readings is in the persistent insistence that Stein is at the center of her work. For Zelazo, Stein’s poem is an attempt to share her personal experience. She

argues that “Stein actually encourages readers to sense as she does, and thus to borrow, as it were, her body” (“Multisensuality” 195). Stein’s body and experience, then, remain the pivotal aspects of *Tender Buttons* and Zelazo is able to construct the authoritative presence and influential artistic intent that is actually absent in the work. Also, Stein’s female body is again conflated with her artistic process and *Tender Buttons*, the separate art object.

Lacking a strong authorial presence to lean on, critics of *Tender Buttons* have allowed the biographical person of Gertrude Stein to infiltrate the work, making it more about the artist than the art. What critics are really doing when they focus on Stein’s life is deciphering her intent. What on earth made her write such a thing? Why is it so oddly appealing? Certainly, there must be some underlying intent, some hidden message, code, system, sense that makes the poem worthwhile – that makes it good. Bettina L. Knapp argues that “like the alchemist who transmutes his metals and records his findings in iconographic representations, ciphers, and diagrams, Stein projects her continuously altering mental meanderings, meditations, visions, and free associations onto real objects, foods, and rooms” (*Gertrude Stein* 111). Such descriptions of process, such attempts to link Stein to her writing, are in search of intent and impetus. Like early critics who visualize Stein writing furiously at night (or in the morning) in her private home, recent critics such as Knapp look to the process of creation, to intent and the author, to find some level of stability.

The absent authorial presence in the work requires the reader to surrender to the work rather than the writer and to strange experiences that cannot be comfortably categorized. Words, themselves, hold sway over the reader. Critics such as Rebecca Scherr have noted the tangibility of language felt in *Tender Buttons*. “To Stein,” she argues, “language in itself was material, as present and touchable as a body or an object” (“Tactile Erotics” 193). Though Scherr is assuming a fair amount about Stein’s beliefs, *Tender Buttons* does treat words more like objects than representations. As Scherr explains, “language does not merely represent or even mediate reality; it is also substantive” (193). No matter how many ways you try to read *Tender Buttons* for traditional representation or signification, something always gives way. These readings simply cannot hold. Stein moves words like objects, placing them in different arrangements to create different experiences. If any experience is shared by Stein and her reader it is the feeling that words are not so easily mastered – that they have a power and a force all their own, and that breaking from comfortable rhetorical conventions brings individual words to life.

CHAPTER 4
MULTIPLICITY, FRAGMENTATION, AND “LITTLE WORDS”: A NEW
APPROACH TO *TENDER BUTTONS*

Tender Buttons does not make sense on its own; that is, it does not make the kind of sense that critics have wanted it to make since it was first published. One of the largest hindrances to interpreting *Tender Buttons* in a less frustrating, more productive way is its history of biographical criticism. So long as interpretations are based on Stein and her personal life, or Stein and her public life, the focus will always remain with Stein. This sounds like a fairly obvious conclusion, and the glaring question is why this is such a problem. The problem with these kinds of interpretations is that they ensure that the text will always be essentially inaccessible because of the impenetrable barriers between Stein, her work, and her audience. Certainly, this can be said of any work of art, in relation to its creator. No one will ever fully understand what the artist intended to create. In the case of *Tender Buttons*, however, the main interpretive problem is not that we can never know the reasons Stein had for writing the way she did, and why her mode has merit, but rather that such emphasis on Stein’s life and Stein’s intentions perpetuates its status as an inaccessible text.

Though recent criticism tries to make the text seem more human and therefore more approachable and less threatening, it ultimately closes the text off and makes it seem more difficult and more distant. In interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, critics are constantly looking for the equivalent of Duchamp’s nude. They search for the familiar, and with much coaxing,

toiling, and researching, they necessarily find it. But, to briefly channel the less sophisticated criticism of Mabel Dodge and Carl Van Vechten, *Tender Buttons* does not allow its readers to find literal, or metaphorical, representational sense. The nude simply is not there – whether Stein intended it to be or not. This is because familiar words in the poem do not function in familiar ways. My argument is that criticism has been unable to find unproblematic approaches to *Tender Buttons* because it has consistently either tried to show what makes the text more like other texts (or other artwork) by focusing on method or metaphor, or it has not engaged with the text in a careful, thorough way (as in early responses). Though my suggested interpretive strategies are certainly not perfect, my hope is that they will inspire similar, and progressively better, interpretations.

Since intention and influence are the most common and persistent bases of interpretation for *Tender Buttons*, any new interpretation must necessarily grapple with these issues. This chapter explores the relationship between intention, influence, and interpretation, but only insofar as it benefits the search for new interpretations of *Tender Buttons*. Part of this juggling act is going back to Stein's writing about writing, and getting a better sense of her positions on art, writing, and the relationship between the artist and her art. Since criticism of *Tender Buttons* so often looks to Stein's intentions, it is helpful to look directly at Stein's stated intentions and the philosophies driving her work to get a better sense of Stein as an artist. And since the majority of criticism on *Tender Buttons* looks at Stein's biography (with a

little of Stein's writing about writing peppered in), it is particularly helpful to shift focus to Stein as an artist rather than Stein as a persona or Stein as a woman, lesbian, etc. Though the distinction between these different selves is slight, it is an important one to make. Emphasis in recent criticism has rested with Stein's personal life and in early criticism it rested with Stein's public persona and relation to other artists. This chapter brings emphasis to Stein as an artist, separate from the personal life that influenced her as an artist and from Stein's connections to the cubist or futurist movement. Stein's writings about writing draw focus back to Stein as an artist, but also pull attention back to the text of *Tender Buttons* – back to its guiding principles, structural patterns, and defining properties.

A large part of what defines *Tender Buttons* is its uniqueness and its refusal to make sense in familiar ways.⁹ This has led critics to Stein's intentions, among a host of other outside influences discussed in the previous two chapters. In order to question the authority and helpfulness of looking to Stein's intentions (either stated or implied), I turn to Stein's 1946 "Transatlantic Interview," and the most specific explanation Stein has provided for *Tender Buttons* – why she wrote the way she did and what she intended to express in specific excerpts. Though this was written more than thirty years after the publication of *Tender Buttons*, it is the most direct explanation of *Tender Buttons* that Stein provided. When reading Stein's explanation of certain sections of *Tender Buttons*, however, the separation

⁹ Of course, the same can be said of nearly any innovative work of art.

between intention and art is incredibly clear. In a section of the interview (conducted through a series of letters), Stein responds directly to selected excerpts from *Tender Buttons*. According to Stein's descriptions of what she intended to do in each excerpt, it seems that the project of *Tender Buttons* was to describe the world in new ways – to give the sense (rhythm) of certain objects or actions without describing them directly – a general description found in any of Stein's writings about *Tender Buttons* (and, a concept that most recent critics explicitly agree with, but implicitly disregard).

To the excerpt "A white hunter is nearly crazy," from the poem "A White Hunter," Stein responds that it "is an abstraction...an abstraction of color. If a hunter is white," she explains, "he looks white, and that gives you a natural feeling that he is crazy, a complete portrait by suggestion" (*A Primer* 24). Stein's explanation suggests that the reader is meant to understand what Stein intended to portray – that the reader should feel that white is crazy, and a white hunter is therefore crazy, and this abstraction should lead to one concrete image, impression, or understanding. Stein's other responses complicate the poem through specification as well, and tempt interpretations that focus on Stein's personal life. "A Waist," for example, has been particularly relevant to homoerotic criticism and Stein's explanation of it only heightens the temptation to attach specific images and actions to it. The poem is quoted in full in the interview, followed by Stein's responses:

A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass
greediness.

Object that is in wood. Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the
rush, make the bottom.

A piece of crystal. A change, in a change that is remarkable there
is no reason to say that there was a time.

A woolen object gilded. A country club is the best disgrace, a
couple of practices any of them in order is so left.

To the first stanza, Stein replies, “This was probably an effort to express an emotion, another version of an ‘Ode to a Mistress’s Eyebrows’” (*A Primer* 25). In response to the next two stanzas, Stein explains, “this is fairly successful of what I knew up to that date. I did not have to call in other things to help. I do not like to do this, there is so much one must reject to keep the even smoothness of suggestion” (25). Her first response pulls focus back to her personal life, making the stanza an intimate expression of an emotion – likely her feelings for a woman, a “mistress.” Stein’s second response confirms suspicions that Stein had something to hide. She explains that she had to “reject” certain words or topics in order to make the stanzas suggestive rather than descriptive. But as I argued in chapter 2, asserting that Stein intended to veil something specific moves a little too far. If Stein’s intentions are the focus, it seems safer to say that Stein intended the poem to remain suggestive and elusive. And, more importantly, even if Stein’s intentions are disregarded, the text itself asks its readers to experience and appreciate the feeling of suggestion – abstraction, rhythm, and subconscious association.

Tender Buttons, as demonstrated in the above-quoted poem, is inherently suggestive – and suggestive to an extreme that most literature does not generally aspire to. Its possible meanings are vague because Stein does not group words together in a way that allows the reader to draw any single conclusion about their meaning. “A single frantic sullenness,” for example, is far too vague to possess a particular meaning. What is “sullenness” but an abstract concept? How can sullenness be “frantic”? And why is it “single”? There is nothing concrete to visualize. Likewise, “object that is in wood” and “hold the pine, hold the rush, make the bottom” do not provide steady images, though they may suggest images. What object is in what wood? What “pine,” what “rush,” what “bottom”? How do you hold and make them if you don’t know what they are? And “A Waist” is not unique in its refusal to make representational or narrative sense. None of Stein’s poems provide steady images or messages to hold onto. Instead, they force the reader to create her own. As such, critics have felt compelled to overlay more concrete images and connotations onto the work.

Even Stein’s own stated intentions are overlaid, rather than inherently present in the work. Simply because Stein made “an effort to illustrate the movement of a donkey going up a hill” when she wrote “a little monkey goes like a donkey,” for example, does not mean the reader will experience this. Nor does it mean that she should. As Paisley Livingston argues, the author intends for the reader to view her work in a certain way, to “make believe” something particular (*Art and Intention* 19). Livingston approaches artistic

intent by dealing with several established philosophies of art and intention, but his own conclusion about influencing the audience is that this influence is not directly connected to the artist's intentions. Rather,

the author's intention is better understood as something the author intends to do herself, such as writing something that will have certain characteristics, and which will lend itself to being read a certain way by certain kinds of persons in a certain context. (19)

The author's actions, then, lend themselves to certain reactions by incorporating "certain characteristics" into the work. And these intentionally-placed characteristics are based on the artist's vision of "certain kinds of persons in a certain context." They are not inherent properties, placed there consciously by the artist to yield a particular reaction or experience from all people for all time.

Most importantly for my argument, Livingston argues that the author's intention is an action that an author intends to carry out, rather than a direct intent to affect the audience. He further explains that "the point is not that the author's intentions are in no way directed towards the actions of others, but that there must be a primary, action-related intention which is meant to bring about certain results" (19). Livingston's exploration of intention goes far beyond the scope of this project, and the technicalities he goes through in order to arrive at a better understanding of artistic intent are perhaps more confusing than helpful for this particular argument. But what

Livingston essentially argues here and elsewhere in his book is that intention is action-based, and is therefore more about the actor than the acted-upon. Stein's artistic process, therefore, is more about herself than it is about *Tender Buttons*, and is therefore not immediately available for interpretations of the text. Even further from the artistic process is the intended outcome once the acted-upon (the art object) finds its audience. Stein's intentions, in other words, made the text what it is today, but the initial intentions that made the text what it is are more relevant to the creative process than the finished product – and even less relevant to audience interpretations and experiences.

It is thus not helpful to apply Stein's intentions directly to the work – or, directly to one's interpretation of one's experience of the work. Her intentions and approaches relate to her creative process, which relates to the finished product of *Tender Buttons*, but using her intentions to overlay traditional meaning onto the work is not productive. By admitting that *Tender Buttons* does not mean in traditional ways, readers should be able to understand *Tender Buttons* without pinning down a theme, message, or goal. Resisting the temptation to reduce the text to its essential motivation or message is difficult, however. This is partly because literary criticism is accustomed to working with themes and metaphors. But it is also true, in part, because Stein's stated intentions, if applied directly to interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, allow the text to mean in more traditional ways. Stein's "Transatlantic Interview," especially, gives the impression that there are specific (though cryptic) images and messages to be discovered in each

individual poem (or perhaps each individual line). Though Stein's responses to *Tender Buttons* in the "Transatlantic Interview" may encourage this kind of search for discovery and subsequent overlaying of traditional meaning, however, her other writings about writing help shift focus away from Stein's life, and back onto what is actually present in *Tender Buttons* – what the text has to offer.

Stein's discussion of the difference between the language of speaking and the language of writing is particularly helpful, and suggests an approach to *Tender Buttons* that does not require the assumption of an all-encompassing theory or a single authorial objective. In *Everybody's Autobiography* Stein suggests that "soon we will come to have a written language that is a thing apart in English" (13). For Stein, spoken language is entrenched in society and is therefore capable of less than written language. She writes that

they always tried to write like anybody talked and it is only comparatively lately that it is true that the written language knows that that is of no interest and cannot be done that is to write as anybody talks because what anybody talks because everybody talks as the newspapers and movies and radios tell them to talk the spoken language is no longer interesting and so gradually the written language says something and says it differently than the spoken language. (13)

Though a bit of a head-spinning exercise to read, this excerpt from *Everybody's Autobiography* is fairly clear in its message. Stein believes, at least as this persona and in this literary work, that written language needs to break from spoken language to remain interesting. It needs to break from standard forms of communication in order to say something that is not regulated by social media. Though Stein's prediction that a new version of the English language would emerge in written language has not come about, in *Tender Buttons* there is a clear deviation from spoken language and from direct communication. In terms of interpretive methods, this similarity between Stein's stated views on language and her work suggests that it is less helpful to look for narrative and interpersonal interaction in *Tender Buttons* than to examine the unique ways in which language functions. It is perhaps more helpful to consider what kind of communication is possible in a work like *Tender Buttons*.

Tender Buttons is different from other literature because it experiments with several uncommon notions of language, art, and representation at once. Aside from Stein's idea about spoken vs. written language, *Tender Buttons*, by Stein's account, is also the result of a growing interest in composition, portraiture, and the weight and value of the individual word. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes of herself that "she...felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world" (119). Since she chooses the word "rhythm," it seems that Stein was not as interested in depicting the world as depicting what it felt like – the general pulses that

make the visible world what it is. Though looking for the particular rhythms in *Tender Buttons* and arguing for specific ways in which Stein saw her world based on the work would be a bit stretched, understanding that *Tender Buttons* is fundamentally nonrepresentational (at least visually and narratively, if not rhythmically) allows the text a certain level of freedom. It allows *Tender Buttons* to be nonrepresentational and suggestive, which it is.

Concepts and methods that Stein embraced from visual art also help to draw attention back to the text itself and open it up to alternate interpretations. Though Stein was influenced by visual art, however, this does not mean that works like *Tender Buttons* can be analyzed solely based on their affiliations with Picasso and the cubists. Certainly, at least, Stein would contest the idea that her writing had more affiliation with another medium than her own – an argument that truly baffled supporters have made in the past. In an anecdote about Picasso's decision to write and leave painting behind forever, Stein explains:

...when I first heard he was writing I had a funny feeling one does you know. Things belong to you and writing belonged to me, there is no doubt about it writing belonged to me. I know writing belongs to me, I am quite certain and nobody no matter how certain you are about anything about anything belonging to you if you hear that somebody says it belongs to them it gives you a funny feeling. You are certain but it does give you a funny feeling. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 15)

In this excerpt, Stein expresses her belief that different artistic media are separate things; an artist cannot simply move from one medium to another. Different artistic media influence one another, but writing is writing is writing, and the same is true for painting. Stein frequently comments on the differences between painting and writing, and Stein's frustration over Picasso's move to poetry highlights these differences. Stein certainly felt that she was working well within the bounds of her medium.

Of course, Stein's opinions and intentions, like any other artist's (or any other human's, for that matter) are not entirely reliable. This is especially the case when these opinions are taken from (auto)biographical works. Stein, herself, explains that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, for example, was written from a specific point of view that is, as she describes, very different from her own. One element of these writings that is fairly stable and less reliant on Stein's intentions, however, is the understanding that Stein saw the English language as something much more vast and diverse than most are willing to accept. And as I suggested at the end of chapter 2, *Tender Buttons* thus requires a more immediate encounter with words themselves – with language itself. Part of this encounter is the inability to identify the words that have more importance and deserve more focus. To choose a poem at random, “Cold Climate” challenges traditional focus. The poem reads: “A season in yellow sold extra strings makes lying places” (*Tender Buttons* 33). In this poem and others, regular hierarchical markers are absent. There are too many verbs here, and the acting noun is too abstract and strange to pull the

necessary weight that could hold these verbs. And words that do pull focus, in this and other poems, often complicate traditional value-structures even further. What is “a season in yellow,” for example, and what does it mean that it “sold extra strings makes lying places”? The phrase “a season in yellow” pulls minimal focus here, and the poem thus lacks the strong focal point necessary for narrative clarity. In more common modes of writing, sentences are based on a key noun and a key verb, and together (with additional grammatical structures) they create a miniature narrative. In *Tender Buttons*, however, words move from one to the next without a sense of narrative or clear focus.

Stein’s explanation of composition and the way it influenced her writing leading up to and including *Tender Buttons* helps make sense of this strange, fluid style, and the lack of narrative focus. In the “Transatlantic Interview,” Stein is asked the following question: “Sherwood Anderson wrote, ‘For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words.’ Is that an adequate summation of what you are trying to do?” (*A Primer* 15). In response, Stein says that “it is and it isn’t. The thing was not so simple as all that” (15). She then proceeds to explain some of her influences and the kinds of experiments she was making. She explains that

everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition. Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else

was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously... (15)

By Stein's account, then, she did not intend to provide points of focus from which the rest of the work could be made sense of. Even if her intention is discounted, notions of composition certainly help make sense of poems like "Cold Climate," in which traditional focus is absent. It seems that looking for a central message, theme, or intention in *Tender Buttons* is not the most productive means of interpretation or interaction. This may seem to be a jump in logic, but at the very least, arguing that *Tender Buttons* was Stein's attempt to give one particular impression, or present one particular message (such as an anti-patriarchal message, for example), is likely flawed. It sounds as if Stein were inspired by the idea of composition in painting and experimented with what composition, and new ideas about composition, would look like in the medium of literature. According to Stein, her burgeoning interest in composition "was the first time in any language that anyone had used that idea of composition in literature" (15). She saw her work as new and different, and here she seems proud of the notion that she was able to do things that had never been done before, such as working with words as though they were brushstrokes and placing each one in relation to the one before, rather than in relation to a particular point of focus.

Though the Rorschach nature of *Tender Buttons* invites readers to find central ideas, images, or themes, it cannot be argued that Stein intended such central ideas, images, or themes. Yet this is the argument that most critics have made over the years. Statements like the above quotation suggest that *Tender Buttons* is more concerned with each individual word than with any particular word or kind of word. Words that suggest menstrual blood to some readers, for example, are not more important than words that simply allude to household items, or that do not seem to have any meaning at all. Rather, the feeling that one experiences when reading *Tender Buttons* does not need to be fought against. The feeling that interpretive, meaningful anchors cannot be found, that sentences are meaningless, is not an instinct that needs to be proven wrong.

Recent critics attempt to make *Tender Buttons* more traditional than it is, perhaps, as a response to early criticism that dismissed the text as mad or hailed it as genius based on its wild nature, and the wild or genius nature of its creator or movement. But *Tender Buttons*, according to Stein's explanation of its influences, does not need to mean in traditional ways in order to be meaningful. Stein's explanation of composition, for example, allows *Tender Buttons* to be different, but still approachable and open to positive reading experiences. When the need to find a "central idea" (*A Primer* 15) is taken away, the text immediately makes more sense. Each small poem, for example, has a title. In most poems, the title would suggest a central subject, theme, or message. But in *Tender Buttons*, the title "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass" is

not necessarily followed by a description of a carafe or glass of any kind. Nor does the title provide much enlightening information about the poem that follows. Most recent critics agree with this interpretation. In general, they agree that *Tender Buttons* is not representational and that the titles do not likely provide helpful information about the poem. If a reader tried to force each word into submission under the ruling sign of the carafe, the poem would fall apart and the reader would fall into frustration, perhaps even claiming that the poem is nonsensical.

Recent critics have fought this kind of conclusion by admitting that the poem does not make traditional sense and that the potential foci of each poem are likely misleading rather than helpful, but adding that the poem does make traditional sense and does have a particular focus when viewed in light of Stein's biography. Admittedly, opening the text up in this way allows more of the words to make sense – at least in a more recognizably literary sense. When Stein's biography is permitted into the text, words suddenly have a point of reference. They have a framework of probable connotations, narratives, and references. "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass," for example, could relate to several aspects of Stein's life. The poem reads:

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single
hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and
not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is
spreading. (*Tender Buttons* 19)

Perhaps words like “spectacle” and “strange” refer to Stein’s celebrity or conflicted sense of self as a homosexual. Perhaps “a single hurt color” is sexually suggestive. Or perhaps “the difference is spreading” refers to Stein’s sense of difference as a homosexual, and the way it spreads, leaks out into every aspect of her life. Perhaps it even refers to new and different art, and the way it is spreading through cubism, futurism, or her experiments with language. The point in presenting such options is that these words, the way they are presented, could suggest nearly *anything*, and attempting to assemble them into a single motivating principle is a mind-boggling, intriguing puzzle that unfortunately denies the fundamental characteristics of *Tender Buttons*. However, with the suggestion that *Tender Buttons* was written with the individual value of words in mind, or with the idea that a single, central idea is not necessary to composition, the above poem does not require further assembly. It is fully assembled, and the reader needs only to experience it. It is no longer a puzzle that requires a guide, but a self-sustaining work of art that is possibly enriched by biographical information (like most works of art) but does not rely on such biographical information to make sense.

Stein’s interest in the value and weight of individual words is particularly enlightening when it comes to finding new interpretive strategies for *Tender Buttons*. Stein discusses how she “began to play with words” in the “Transatlantic Interview,” explaining, “I was a little obsessed by words of equal value. [...] and I felt that I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant and act within it” (*A*

Primer 17-18). Stein explains that she “took individual words and thought about them until [she] got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word,” suggesting that individual words and their relation to other individual words are more relevant to interpreting *Tender Buttons* than finding a central message or theme around which all words revolve. She further explains the kind of word-play that led to *Tender Buttons*, recalling,

Also the fact that as an American my mind was fresher towards language than the average English mind, as we had more or less renewed the word structure in our language. All through that middle period the interest was with that largely, ending up with *Tender Buttons*. In this I think there are some of the best uses of words there are. The movement is simple and holds by little words. (18)

As Stein suggests here, *Tender Buttons* has a “simple” movement and “holds by little words.” Each “little” word functions as a miniature experiment, testing out its weight and value, and then the way in which these words could be used to create new patterns, new forms of expression. “Cold Climate,” for example, is held together not by a single idea, but by individual words. The second half of the poem, in particular, moves in this way. In the progression from “sold” to “extra” to “strings” to “makes” to “lying” to “places” there is no central idea to which each of these words connect. Rather, each word stands on its own, and subsequently relates to the next word, which connects to the next word. The ambiguity of this string of words allows the poem a higher level of multiplicity. It also places more emphasis on each word,

inviting the reader to encounter these words both individually and in connection to the words surrounding it – rather than to a central idea or narrative. When there is a central idea or narrative, several less important words go relatively unnoticed. Here, each word has weight, and is thus rediscovered as something new. As Stein explains, she was interested in new “word structure[s]” and language as something “fresh” rather than old and predictably connotative.

Though Stein’s intentions, coupled with her method of getting the weight and feel of a word and then moving on to the next one, cannot be used as stable interpretive evidence, any more than her biography can, understanding what the work was intended to be points to some of the more untraditional properties that are present in the text itself and that get overshadowed by, or used as evidence for, more biography-centered readings.¹⁰

This suggested mode of interpretation does not eliminate the possibility for the words in *Tender Buttons* to mean, however, and I do not mean to return to interpretation à la Dodge or Van Vechten. Stein’s writing is not a senseless chant that should be allowed to wash over the reader in a semi-conscious state. Rather, the words in *Tender Buttons* mean and hold attachments, and these attachments are real and present rather than distant and

¹⁰ I do not mean to argue here that intentional arguments are sometimes helpful or acceptable and sometimes not, but rather that in the case of *Tender Buttons*, Stein’s writings about her intentions highlight interpretive possibilities that are often overshadowed by biographical or intentional criticism. I use her intentions as a starting point, not as direct evidence.

hazy. My argument, however, is that they do not possess *particular* attachments and suggestions because they are not connected by clear connotation, narrative, or theme. As Stein has said, “it is impossible to put [words] together without sense” (*A Primer* 18). She explains that she “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” (*A Primer* 18). But meaning in *Tender Buttons* is not dictated by the author or even by the constraints of the poem. The way the work is composed allows meaning to remain fluid – real, but fluid.

Tender Buttons is about the writer’s relationship to words, in relation to the physical world. It is also about the reader’s relationship to words, in relation to the physical world. But these two relationships are not the same. When reading *Tender Buttons* it is far less productive to try to read Stein’s experience than it is to simply experience it. Stein’s writings about her writing and art in general remove the necessity to search for central themes or messages. And, they remove the necessity to find the human element. In *Tender Buttons*, it seems, the human element is the reader. Without the demonstrative presence of the author, or the controlling element of a central idea, readers are forced to encounter words as they are, with limited human guidance, and limited controlling principles. Language seems less like a tool and more like a separate entity, which is understandably discomfoting.

Recent critics who have made similar arguments about the poem’s ability to unsettle the reader and shake her from her static modes of

conception, interpretation, and interaction attach this effect to Stein's intentions or inner struggles.¹¹ They argue that Stein wanted to experiment with Jamesian psychology, that she needed to be different to create a space for herself, or that she wanted to reprogram her readers to think beyond patriarchal structures, among a host of other Stein-related associations. Though these kinds of arguments are fascinating, intelligent, and sensitive to the material, they make unnecessary steps that keep the text at a distance from the reader, when the nature of the text begs the reader to be close, present, and in direct communion with the text. Stein herself was perhaps not at all concerned with the effect the text had on her audience, but the text she created asks for a certain kind of relationship that does not require Stein, Stein's life, Stein's acquaintances, or Stein's experiences to exist.

Tender Buttons is interested in the current moment, the experience of reading, and the immediate interaction with language. Simultaneously, *Tender Buttons* supports Stein's stated intention to explore the relationship between the internal self and the external world. Stein, according to her two (auto)biographies, wanted to express her own experience of the world and make this experience as present as possible. Whether or not Stein achieved this is rather irrelevant, and the extent to which readers of *Tender Buttons* experience what *Stein* experienced in those present moments is not particularly important either.

¹¹ For the poem's unsettling nature in relation to gender, see Shari Benstock (*Left Bank* 158-62) or Elyse Blankley ("Beyond the 'Talent'" 206), among others; for its relation to Jamesian psychology see Dana Cairns Watson (*Gertrude Stein and the Essence* 36).

What is important is recognizing the spirit of the text. *Tender Buttons* lends itself most readily to the present and to the act of reading. It is best understood as an interaction, and Stein's intention to record her own interactions simply leads us to this spirit that is inherent in the text. As some critics have argued, reading *Tender Buttons* is a very personal and intimate experience. Suzanne Zelazo, for example, argues that *Tender Buttons* creates intimacy between Stein and her audience, since "Stein actually encourages readers to sense as she does, and thus to borrow... her body" ("Multisensuality" 195), while David R. Jarraway argues that "in reading Stein... we find our own quite personal ways of authorizing ourselves" (*Going the Distance* 25).

There is nothing wrong with seeing specific themes within the text in the way that Jarraway indirectly suggests. This is bound to happen. In formal scholarship, however, and in widespread interpretive standards of the text, it is most appropriate to pay less attention to these chance themes and narratives that necessarily appear in the work and more attention to more stable foci of interpretation. Criticism is already moving in this direction of looking at more stable foci, but vestiges of the familiar interpretive methods are still weighing the work down, as is seen in Zelazo's understanding of the spirit of the text coupled with her insistence that Stein's self (body, in this case) is central to the work.

Criticism of *Tender Buttons* has begun in the twenty-first century to focus more on wordplay, arrangement, and the relationship between objects

and words, and this is arguably the most productive move for Stein scholarship to make. Sara J. Ford's reading of *Tender Buttons* is a particularly helpful step in this critical direction. She argues that

in *Tender Buttons*, written in 1912 and published two years later, Stein confronts the power of language to determine our experience in the world. The text reflects her belief that consciousness is determined by its relationships, particularly its relationship with language. It also reflects Stein's sense of the importance of artistic will as a force that can bear witness to unnecessarily restrictive constructs of linguistic order and that can create new linguistic forms that might allow for a greater degree of difference and multiplicity. The language of *Tender Buttons* is the performance of a consciousness that is at once determined and determining. (*Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens* 43)

Several of the points Ford makes here are relevant to forming new interpretive strategies that are less reliant on Stein, though her own argument still locates Stein's "belief[s]" at the center of interpretation. The first point Ford makes is that language has power. She goes on to argue that *Tender Buttons* explores linguistic boundaries and uses "new linguistic forms" to open language up to mean in new ways – to "allow for a greater degree of difference and multiplicity." Ford's argument that the language of the text "is the performance of a consciousness that is at once determined and determining" falls in line with other interpretations that suggest Stein

intended to change thought patterns or comfortable modes of reading, thinking, or communicating, but it also draws attention to the way in which *Tender Buttons* is a finished text (determined) but is also constantly in the process of being determined (determining). The text does not have an interpretable meaning because it performs the action of creating, moving, and changing. It expresses more of a feeling – a sense – than a direct message (as wishy-washy as that may sound). Ford’s argument about the power dynamics at work in the text also supports this notion. She argues that “artistic control” in the work “is... never absolute,” that it is “a kind of ongoing negotiation with the determining powers of language” (52). *Tender Buttons* invites the reader to interact with words directly, as an “external experience” rather than a comfortable inner dialogue or subjective interaction.

In other words, to take Ford’s reading a step farther than she does (and to disagree with her slightly), Stein’s authorial presence in the text is complicated by Stein’s unique use of language and the text’s emphasis on subject-object relationships. Rather than borrowing Stein’s body, as Zelazo suggests, the text asks its reader to replace Stein’s body – to become the subject who is interacting with the external. The most immediate external interaction in the work is with language. Though Stein may have been more interested in portraying interactions with objects, food, and rooms – with the external elements of her environment – what the text offers is an interaction with language. Language, in a sense, becomes an object and the reader experiences language in the way that Stein likely experienced the world

around her. The spirit of experience is carried over from Stein's intended creative actions to translate into an altered version within the text.

The relationship between the author, intention, art object, and the audience in *Tender Buttons* is not as direct as most critics have suggested. Rather, certain elements of Stein's intentions are perhaps apparent in the text, but not exactly in the way Stein intended them to be. Thus, arguing, for example, that Stein intended to veil her emotions, recreate pre-Oedipal language, or reframe contemporary women's parlor chat culture, and then argue interpretations based on such intentions (which are based on knowledge of Stein's life) is to assume too direct a connection between Stein, her intentions, her art, and her audience. Literary criticism has acknowledged for some time now that such a connection is too simplistic – that it assumes too much. But in criticism of *Tender Buttons*, it seems, this acknowledgement has been forgotten in lieu of the text's status (accurate or not) as a one-of-a-kind text.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Whether it is because *Tender Buttons* is presumably difficult to read, or because it is so attached to the fascinating Gertrude Stein, the work has been supported by a rather enduring critical commitment to finding the meaning behind this elusive text. *Tender Buttons* has been conflated with Stein, or vice versa, and it could be argued that Stein is the only real substance that is keeping *Tender Buttons* afloat as literature. However, it is my belief that whether or not *Tender Buttons* is a valuable literary work, its critical history has certainly limited its potential.

The main problem with past interpretations of *Tender Buttons* is not that they assume the text is difficult, but that they make the text unnecessarily difficult. And, this difficulty does not enhance the text, but simply alter it. *Tender Buttons* does not require more advanced reading practices but rather requires reading practices that are simply different. In other words, *Tender Buttons* cannot be explained by a guide or unifying artistic philosophy that blossoms under the right critical eye. Instead, it requires new reading practices that allow it its disunity.

I have argued that one of the main issues with past interpretations of *Tender Buttons* is that they cannot account for the text as a whole. I have also argued that uniting the text as a whole is problematic. Initially, there seems to be a significant discrepancy between these two arguments. My argument is

not actually contradictory, however. I argue that *Tender Buttons* can be unified under certain artistic principles or methods, such as Stein's notions of composition and the weight and value of the individual word, but it cannot be unified under specific themes, messages, or easily labeled artistic principles or theories, such as cubism or feminism. There are some properties in the work, in other words, that span the work as a whole, and can thus be seen as unifying. But labeling the text as cubist, feminist, or homoerotic is too limiting. Understanding the text as a whole in terms of composition, etc., is not limiting because it simply points to the structure of *Tender Buttons*; it does not permit *Tender Buttons* to make sense only in and of a particular message, theme, or "ism." As I quoted in chapter 2 from Marjorie Perloff, "perhaps the greatest difficulty Stein's writing presents to her readers is that it is not finally typical or characteristic of any one thing – neither characteristically 'feminist' nor 'lesbian' nor 'expatriate' nor 'Jewish' nor 'Cubist' nor 'American,' nor even characteristically 'pre-postmodern'" (*Poetic License* 159). *Tender Buttons* cannot be gathered under one recognizable, established unifying label.

The text does seem to have a fairly unified vision, however, even if it defies unifying "-isms." For example, the text can be read as a departure from the language of speaking, or an attempt to re-invest words with individual worth and power. Ironically, it is most productive and most relevant to focus on these unifying principles in order to allow each individual word, sentence, and paragraph the multiplicity and indistinct suggestiveness that it needs to

possess. Rather than analyzing what each word means in relation to another to develop an overall argument about theme or influence, readers can focus on how the words interact with, speak to, and influence one another – on the larger connections and movements that support the text’s movement “by little words” (*A Primer* 18).

To exemplify this approach, I return to Lisa Ruddick’s analysis of *Tender Buttons* as an example of the kind of criticism that has been done on the work so far, followed by an example of how I would suggest to read the sections Ruddick analyzes. I choose her article not because it is ridiculous, but because it is a good example of how convincing arguments like hers can be – and, subsequently, how this kind of convincing argument ultimately denies the text’s defining properties. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Ruddick argues that *Tender Buttons* is concerned with pre-Oedipal language and that Stein intended to re-vision female sexuality as something beautiful rather than dirty or shameful. She focuses primarily on menstrual imagery and the physical female body.

Ruddick’s first example is taken from “A Petticoat,” one of the more suggestive poems in the work. Ruddick argues that the poem, which reads “A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm,” is an example of the way in which Stein uses “red and roses . . . to suggest menstrual blood, sometimes with a negative association of something shameful or dirty” (“A Rosy Charm” 226). Though “disgrace,” “ink spot,” and “rosy charm” lend themselves rather pliantly to Ruddick’s argument, there is nothing in the poem that fully

supports this reading. Though the poem is titled “A Petticoat,” this does not mean that it tells the story of a light white petticoat that is disgraced by an “ink spot.” “A Petticoat,” like all poems in the work, can be appreciated without anchoring it to a single focus or message.

Ruddick associates these phrases, or “image clusters” (226) with particular imagery and interprets the poem’s listing format as a unifying principle that ties each phrase to the petticoat and thus to female sexuality. But I suggest that it is most helpful to view each word and each phrase as a separate moment, rather than to unify them under one explanation. The phrase, “a light white,” is actually quite abstract on its own. Every reader’s reaction to this moment will be different; the interaction will be unique. The poem only *suggests* a correlation between the four phrases and the title by placing them in close proximity. But what this connection is will always be unknown. Or, it will be fluid – malleable to each reader’s relationship with words. What is constant is syntax – rhetoric – and the physical words that are not clearly attached to any reference in the outside world. These are the elements that can be focused on to create solid arguments about the text.

Arguments such as Ruddick’s try to form attachments between these pieces in order to make the text more accessible or meaningful – more important, perhaps. Ruddick’s interpretation of “A Box” makes similar strides to find unifying messages or symbols. Ruddick chooses lines or phrases that stand out under the assumption of her feminist Freudian reading. “There is no disgrace in looking,” she argues, and suggests that “on the

contrary, the act of looking with care eliminates the illusion of disgrace” (227). Ruddick argues that this is the message the text is meant to convey. Here, then, Ruddick takes the line from “A Box” almost literally, adding very particular connotations to “disgrace” and “looking.” The disgrace is the perception of female sexuality, and looking involves not simply “looking,” as the poem presents, but “looking with care.” But this line could just as easily refer to some maxim about voyeurism, for example. Most likely, and in step with my argument, this line refers to no particular thing. To clarify, this line, and all others in the poem, may refer to particular objects or concepts, but any references are incidental. They are not in the work, but rather in the gaps in between the actual words of the work. The words themselves are too vague to point to particular images or create particular narratives. Rather, this vagueness compels readers to add particularity, adding connotation and narrative timelines where there are none. The line quoted above is abstract and suggestive. Looking at what? Why would there be disgrace in the first place? Answers to these kinds of questions are simply not present in the text. And this is why critics like Ruddick have to work so hard to find them.

Returning a little later to “A Petticoat,” Ruddick continues her argument about looking with care, claiming that the poem “shows a movement not from ‘disgrace’ to mere acceptability but from disgrace to ‘charm’” (227). She argues further that “the stain that seems bad at first is actually appealing” (227). One of the major difficulties with this argument is that Ruddick assumes linearity, while the poem encourages a more scattered

sense of time and movement. Since this poem is a list, it could be argued that each phrase is continually true, and not just true in its place in time. Because “a rosy charm” comes after “a disgrace,” this does not mean that disgrace is cancelled out by the “rosy charm.” If the poem were clearly narrative, this might be the case. But since the phrases are simply listed, with no indication of how they should relate to one another in time (any one of them could be moved and the structure would remain the same), interpretations of the poem that focus on time or narrative are much less accurate or effective than ones that do not. Rather than focusing on the message, it is helpful to focus on how these words operate within the poem. They suggest images that could differ greatly from one reader to the next, and they place these images, these suggestions, side by side. It is up to the reader to decide how to interact with the words. They are controlled by rhetoric, but not by theme, metaphor, or theory.

As I argued in chapter 3, the poem “A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass” cannot be taken literally or representationally. And, the title does not necessarily guide the body of the poem. Ruddick, however, argues that this poem contributes to her argument about seeing (“looking”). “Another of Stein’s frequent images for seeing,” she argues, “is that of a bottle or glass, with something in it (again, a red thing, a dirty thing, here a ‘hurt color’) that one can inspect with care” (227). Ruddick argues that this first poem in *Tender Buttons*, specifically, the first line of the first poem, “is an announcement of the author’s intent to adjust our focus – give us ‘glasses’ or

‘spectacles’ – so that we will see certain objects (like ‘hurt colors’) in a new way: they are inoffensive, they are ‘nothing strange’” (227). The line Ruddick refers to here is “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing” (*Tender Buttons* 19). Ruddick seems to assume that “hurt color” should be read as the color of hurt. However, in this abstract sentence, there is nothing to determine that it is not the color that is hurt. The sentence is so vague that these words could refer to virtually anything. And though one reading may be more likely than another, the mode of interaction is always the same. Words like “color” must be reckoned with without a standard qualification like red, blue, green, bold, or pale. And “color” becomes like an object. It is not applied to anything. It is simply the word, the abstract concept of “color.”

Ruddick argues that, like images of red or roses, images of glass are scattered throughout the poem to create a unified message or theme. “The myriad ‘glasses’ in *Tender Buttons*,” she argues, “may be either spectacles making us see things newly, or drinking glasses, receptacles containing the objects of inspection” (227). The problem is that they could also be symbolic of countless other ideas. Even Ruddick seems aware of this multiplicity, but fights it by providing multiple explanations that all fit into an imposed theme. As well as spectacles or receptacles, she says glasses “may be looking-glasses, mirrors that by reflecting things accurately once again remove the illusion of a stain” (227). Even within Ruddick’s theme of re-visioned female sexuality, words like “glass” call forth multiple symbolic possibilities.

Ruddick does not only gather these images under a theme, she also provides words with concrete images – objects in the real world that are represented by more cryptic language in the poem. Images of glass can represent the physical objects (symbolic images) of spectacles, receptacles, or mirrors. All of these images concretize the concept of glass in imagery. While such an interpretation is tempting, it actually goes against the nature of the poem. *Tender Buttons* works best and yields the most rewarding reading experience when the reader does not have to fight against the text. As I have argued in chapter 3, understanding that language functions differently in *Tender Buttons* – not as direct communication but as elusive suggestion – and that there is no central theme or message, no point at which and from which all dispersive elements arrive, is essential to a more fruitful reading of the text.

I have also argued, perhaps rather adamantly, that Stein’s life does not provide a stable basis on which to build critical arguments. Ruddick bases her argument, partly, on her knowledge of William James, and the interaction Stein had with him years before writing *Tender Buttons*. “Stein’s method of challenging conventional patterns of appraisal,” she argues, “is consistent with ideas she first heard formally from William James, whose psychology is dedicated to dignifying perceptual data that we habitually dismiss” (228). Ruddick also looks to Stein’s method and intentions. She argues that Stein “not only writes about the body,” but also “thinks of herself as writing with the body” (228). Ruddick’s subsequent argument about writing as secretion fits elegantly with her arguments about menstrual blood, and she comes full

circle to explain the correlation between Stein's method and symbolism as attempts to "undermine selective attention and its false hierarchies" (229).

Ruddick argues that

. . . by focusing on bodily blots that are normally overlooked or even thought bad, Stein works against culturally imprinted habits of selective attention. Similarly, by writing *with* spots – with whatever comes out of her – Stein suspends censorship or selective attention in herself. (229, italics original)

This is a fantastic argument – except that its assumptions are not stable. They are based mostly on knowledge of Stein's life: on her gender and her interactions with William James. This argument also relies fairly heavily on Stein's method. The poem certainly supports the method Ruddick suggests, since it reads rather like free writing, but Ruddick's argument still imposes controlling principles onto the work that make it unnecessarily complex. Ruddick's argument is intelligent and elegant, and uses evidence from the text to her best advantage. Even though Ruddick's argument is clear, however, and does not seem at first to disregard the nature of the text, it actually does. Even by Ruddick's admission, the text "undermine[s] selective attention" (229). In other words, the text makes it difficult to pay attention to one word, phrase, or sentence more than another.

In *Tender Buttons*, words are treated with equal value, and it is difficult to tell what should be focused on. In *Tender Buttons*, everything

pulls focus. Every word. And while this is distracting, it creates a unique sense of multiplicity that encourages a truly unique interaction with text – with words. Ruddick, however, along with several others, argues that this multiplicity is part of an overarching philosophy or message and that it is employed to a specific end. I argue that this end, whatever it may be, and if it may be, can never be pinned down. It is more productive to stop searching for this unifying principle and start appreciating the text's multiplicity and fragmentation.

It could be argued that opening the text up to multiplicity and fragmentation makes it more difficult to read, and even more of a challenge than searching for unity and subjectivity. After all, a large part of what makes difficult works difficult is that they break from standard reading practices (or artistic principles). My argument has not been that *Tender Buttons* should not be considered a difficult work, but rather that it is easier and more fruitful to interact with the text when the reader stops trying to make it into something it is not, and instead accepts what it is. Reading with an understanding that there is no hidden message, or that even if there is it is not helpful, and an understanding that the text calls for a direct, uncomfortable interaction with words actually makes the text more approachable.

By chronicling and analyzing a wide range of critical responses to *Tender Buttons*, taking a careful look at Stein's writings on writing, and drawing attention back to the text of *Tender Buttons*, I have shown that past approaches to the work have proven largely unhelpful. By suggesting my own

interpretive strategies for *Tender Buttons*, I hope to encourage other new approaches – approaches that allow the text its multiplicity and fragmentation, and that read the text as an invitation rather than a confrontation.

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