

Gertrude Stein: Nonsense with a Social Conscience

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By Sarah Henstra



ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS, I've been attending a creative writing workshop led by award-winning poet Hoa Nguyen. We read aloud, paragraph by paragraph, from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and then write our own poetry with the help of Hoa's prompts. As a novelist I'm a bit intimidated by poetry — by Gertrude's poetry, in particular.

I mean, listen to this: "A shawl is a hat and hurt and a red balloon and an under coat and a sizer a sizer of talks."

I worry that I'm missing something.

As the godmother of modernism, Gertrude Stein is best remembered for her wild experiments with genre and verse. To the uninitiated, her sly humor and deliberate sabotage of syntax appear as though she's rubbing our faces in our inability to make sense of her work. But Gertrude was anything but elitist; she had a keen social conscience and, along with her partner Alice B. Toklas, was deeply involved in the world around her.

During World War I Gertrude and Alice imported a Ford truck from the US that they christened "Auntie," learned to drive, and used it to deliver medical supplies to the front in France. These experiences sensitized them to the suffering of the young foreign soldiers who were barely old enough to grasp the political and historical import of the war they were fighting.

Once when Auntie was in for repairs, Gertrude overheard the mechanic scolding his young assistant: “You are all a *generation perdue!*” The phrase resonated with Gertrude, and years later she recounted the story to Ernest Hemingway: “That is what you all are, all of you young people who served in the War... You are a Lost Generation.” The label neatly captured the collective sense of aimlessness and melancholia haunting those who came of age during the war and witnessed unprecedented losses.

Discovering these biographical details about Gertrude heightened my appreciation of her poetry. I began to view her punning and nonsense as stylistic strategies that dramatized the breakdown of meaning and eruption of violence into everyday domestic life. I started to see *Tender Buttons* as a dinner party held during a Zeppelin raid — something Gertrude and Alice actually experienced once, when dining with Picasso. Day-to-day life must go on in the face of terror and trauma, Gertrude’s poems seem to be saying. But these mundane details might at any moment be jostled and shocked into something strange:

“Burnt and behind and lifting a temporary stone and lifting more than a drawer.”

Okay. I still don’t get it, exactly. But knowing Gertrude was out there, working to make a difference in other people’s lives, makes me *feel* it in a new way. And that’s the whole point of reading poetry, isn’t it? To feel something new.

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