

The Time-Sense: On Stein's Repetition

So, as some of you may know, this panel started out as a little bit of a joke—the theme of this year's MSA is “Structures of Innovation,” so I thought it would be funny to have a panel “against innovation.” But as with most academic jokes, it's really not that funny, perhaps because it comes out of a serious frustration with the ways in which concepts of the “new,” especially in modernist studies, flicker back and forth between being rich objects of critical inquiry and an uninterrogated term of praise, or an unproblematic signifier of modernity itself. In particular, the term “formal innovation” as an explanation for *anything* seems to me to be the most monstrous possible cop-out, insofar as it imagines a fixed repertoire of literary forms from which there is no departing without the quasi-mystical event of “innovation.” As Max Cavitch has observed, “the long and complex history of versification in English poetry”—and I think we can safely make the leap to English literary form in general—“is poorly suited to teleological narratives of liberation, despite a lot of early twentieth-century fanfare about breaking ‘new wood’ and ‘insurgent naked throb[bings] of the instant moment’” (33).

It seems clear why these oscillations should be so frustrating; for one thing, as Cavitch's overly graphic Pound and Lawrence quotations, to say nothing of our easy association between “innovation” and “modernism,” should immediately tip us off, innovation itself is historical, taking on different valences in different periods and social systems, so that “innovation” sounds very different in the mouths of Ezra Pound and, say, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. For example, in his recent essay “Make it New,” which is almost Steinian in its exhaustiveness, Jed Rasula observes that “by the end of the Thirties, the rhetoric of the new in artistic circles had

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acquired a paradoxically dated aura.” In *Syncopations*, Rasula offers a salutary check on a too-easy Whig history of poetry, arguing that “[L]iterary history is not really about priority, but about agency; not who did it first, but who coordinated doing with knowing, poetry with poetics” (*Syncopations* 210). But perhaps this routing of innovation through what amounts to *intention* should give us pause. As I hope to demonstrate, the problem with innovation runs a bit deeper even than that; after all, newness itself is by no means a philosophically straightforward notion. As Dana Seitler has so persuasively argued in her book on the concept of atavism, “modern thought oriented itself around a paradigm of obsolescence and return that structured the experience of modern time” (1), not because “innovation” is not central to our understanding of modernity but because, as Seitler points out, the very possibility of infinite progress bears inside it the threat of infinite regress (3). So, in an effort to to turn a complaint into a construction, or rather, to turn a joke into a panel, this session is about the temporal structures of modernity that operate “against innovation”: repetition, haunting, obsolescence.

So my purpose today is to take up repetition in Stein as a way of understanding what we can learn from an anti-innovative reading of modernism. Deleuze writes that “in every respect, repetition is a transgression” (3): what laws or boundaries, then, do Stein’s repetitions transgress, and why do we care? I wish to show that Stein’s repetition, and the reception thereof, reveals, and thereby critiques, our tendency to implicitly treat innovation as an *ethical* as well as an aesthetic good. Stein herself was of course quite invested in narratives of literary innovation; she famously called “Melancha” “the beginning of her revolutionary work” and “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature” (ABT 742, 714). Yet that progress narrative, a hallmark of the literary persona of Gertrude Stein, Genius, derives much of

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its power from its perversity, referring as it usually does to the anti-innovative “continuous present” of Stein’s repetitive style.

Now, in speaking of Stein’s repetition, I don’t for a minute suppose that I am breaking new ground—we’re against innovation, aren’t we? Repetition is one of Stein’s most characteristic stylistic features. It’s noted widely by critics, including on multiple panels this weekend at MSA, and repetition has always been the conventional target of Gertrude Stein parodies in popular culture. Perhaps you remember a moment from the 1935 Fred Astaire film *Top Hat*, in which the dressmaker, Beddini, reads Ginger Rogers’s character a telegram: “Come ahead stop stop being a sap stop you can even bring Alberto stop my husband is stopping at your hotel stop when do you start stop.” Poor Beddini says, “I cannot understand who wrote this,” and Ginger Rogers’s character replies, “Sounds like Gertrude Stein.” Stein’s repetitive style is at once her claim to avant-gardism and the grounds on which she is susceptible to parody and, often, dismissal. Stein’s writing *of* repetition, and her writing *about* repetition, therefore offers us a window into the problem always raised by the historical avant-garde, the contradiction of a claim to productivity or invention that proceeds through a radical dilatoriness, a refusal of productivity in favor of dwelling in the strangenesses of sameness. Lest I imbue the strangenesses of sameness with their own mystique, let us, as we proceed, remember that they are also very fertile grounds for ridicule, and indeed, as Stein herself pointed out, “the real Gertrude Stein [is] ... funnier in every way than the imitations” (ABT 828). It is crucial that avant-gardism is readable as both transgressive and genuinely dismissable—nonsense, garbage—on exactly the same grounds. Such anti-innovation counters the modernist literary history that we are so prone to accepting, the “originality of the avant-garde” that Rosalind Krauss once puckishly called a “modernist myth.”¹

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We can see both the modernist myth and its native anti-innovative undertow in Stein's 1926 address "Composition as Explanation," where she marks out a narrative of innovation that is self-parodying in its formality:

Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical. That is the reason why the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic, there is hardly a moment in between [...]. (521)

Stein's repetition matches the world-weary sense that this story of artistic innovation is always the same story—the outlaw becomes the classic because his work is, in a hilarious literalism, "classified," no longer an aberration but now belonging to a class, and so "classical." The bald arbitrariness implicit in this heroic narrative of invention and canonization is realized in a virtuosic display of repetition, where repetition functions as tautology and self-fulfillment:

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept. And they refuse to accept it for a very simple reason and that is that they do not have to accept it for any reason. (521)

Aesthetic judgment is here flattened into a simple refusal to accept, a binary operation in which motivation seems to be rather beside the point. Even refusal turns out to be a passive absence of motivation, of "any reason." Indeed, aesthetic judgment emerges as a mere epiphenomenon of the passing of clock-time, as when Stein writes, "Automatically with the acceptance of the time-sense comes the recognition of the beauty and once the beauty is accepted the beauty never fails any one"

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(522). The arbitrariness of literary history is therefore also an overdetermination: aesthetic judgment is implicit in temporal pastness or presentness, “automatically” so. The originality of the avant-garde reveals aesthetic judgment as something other than itself, and innovation as, indeed, sameness. This is not so much a refusal of progress narratives as a pushing of them to their furthest limit; innovation is reduced to its most literal sense: it is the merely new, recognized as such only retrospectively and purely as a result of the fact of retrospection, of pastness. “No one thinks these things when they are making when they are creating what is the composition, naturally no one thinks, that is no one formulates until what is to be formulated has been made,” Stein writes (523). “Naturally no one thinks”—what a picture of innovation to pit against the literary persona of Gertrude Stein, Genius.

Ironically, in pushing a heroic modernist history of innovations to its furthest limit, Stein affirms the anti-innovative “everyday”—what she calls “the daily life” (“What Is English Literature” 210, e.g.)—in which whatever random garbage you happen to be doing on a given day becomes crystallized as a “classic”—not because there is some mysterious magic in the quotidian, but automatically and as a mere function of the passing of clock-time.² As Stein puts it, “[c]omposition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are that composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living” (“Composition as Explanation” 523). Here we see the faintest echo of the conclusions drawn in Stein’s collaborative 1896 psychological study, “Normal Motor Automatism”: composition, widely thought to be a conscious and indeed highly intentional act, can indeed have its origin in as lowly and unconscious a thing as the *body*. Composition emerges as indistinguishable from “daily living,”

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except insofar as it is mediated by clock-time. The priority of historical time in aesthetic judgment, and therefore in the discernment of “innovation,” makes of this model a perverse *historicism*.

Stein’s clockwork literary history—a history of, to steal a title from Rasula, “every day another vanguard”³—brings us face to face with a feminist and queer conundrum, a conundrum about time. As Jennifer Fleissner has brilliantly demonstrated in her essay “Is Feminism a Historicism?,” there are serious grounds on which we might resist any literary history that fails to consider the challenges that feminist thought has posed to history *as such*—no matter how many female authors those histories “recuperate.” The literary history of innovation in particular presupposes the priority of a temporality that feminist theory has contested—generally speaking, though not exclusively, the political temporality that Walter Benjamin, after Henri Bergson, called “homogeneous, empty time” (261). Feminist critics have instead posited what Fleissner names a “self-differing temporality” that may take a variety of forms, such as the “repeating with difference” of Judith Butler or the “future anterior” of theorists like Diane Elam and Drucilla Cornell (58). But we might start even closer to home, with Virginia Woolf’s observation that the “homogeneous, empty time” of national history depends on, and yet erases, female labor. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf makes this point fictively in her description of an elderly woman:

[I]f one asked her what her life has meant to her, she would say that she remembered the streets lit for the battle of Balaclava, or had heard the guns fire in Hyde Park for the birth of King Edward the Seventh. And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and

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cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. (87-8)

The time of this woman's life is repetitive and fundamentally nonhistorical, if by historical we mean understandable by way of national time. Woolf's image of daily living stands in stark contrast to Stein's, for though such living is characterized by the repetitive tasks of dinners cooked and plates and cups washed, there is no mechanism by which such daily living can be preserved even in memory, much less entered into history as invention, innovation, or "classic." Stein's own account, in "What Is English Literature," rewrites Woolf's bifurcated masculine and feminine histories by flattening them:

So you see that up to the nineteenth century a number of things had been and gone and each time something had been and gone there had been a great deal of writing. That is again inevitable in a daily island life, if they write at all they write a great deal. Either nothing is worth writing about or everything is worth writing about. That anybody can understand. (210)

In *this* retelling of nineteenth-century events, we lose the specific (albeit exemplary) subjectivity of the reminiscing woman or the specific events and tasks of her life—from the birth of King Edward the Seventh to the sending of children to school—in favor of "a number of things [that] had been and gone," an undifferentiated and, more importantly, *undifferentiable* series of that most general of terms, "things," which must all be characterized together: "Either nothing is worth writing about or everything is worth writing about." Events—or "things"—enter into history by losing their distinctness, in a genuinely absurd act of leveling.

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In other words, Stein's model of innovation is radical to the degree that it is ridiculous. This ridiculousness is crucial, I would argue, because it allows us to track the ways in which anti-innovation is a target of moral indignation. Henri Bergson famously argues that laughter is a force of social regulation that acts to curb rigid or automatic behaviors, which, in the worst case, are evidence of antisocial "vices" (21, 14). So finding out why we laugh at Stein's repetition may tell us what we think its vices are, and therefore how, as I am arguing, "innovation" carries an ethical charge. Quite simply, the premise underlying much ridicule of Stein's writing is that it *must not be hard work* to produce, that it fails to make distinctions based on value—that, indeed, it renders the very notion of literary value moot. This supposition comes to be quite heavily moralized in the reception of Stein's repetition in particular. The idea that composition could come about unawares—that, as Stein and Leon Solomons wrote in "Normal Motor Automatism," "It is not he but his arm that is doing it" (494)—amounts to a poetics of *refusal to produce*, a form of unforgivable sloth. This repetitive language is not even the laborious female non-labor of dinners cooked and plates and cups washed, the appropriable reproduction of life that feeds capital, but *actual* non-labor—and a non-labor that, in a gigantic affront to the whole enterprise of literary history, has become canonized as a "classic," as if purely by virtue of its pastness. This is the critique implicit in the behaviorist B. F. Skinner's notorious essay "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?" in which he diagnoses Stein's writing as a continuation of her 1896 experiments with Solomons. As a journalist, Jane Stafford, glossed Skinner's diagnosis for the *Science News-Letter*, "her writing is done with her wrist and not with her mind"—you can hear the echo of Skinner's echo of Solomons and Stein (134). A 1934 editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* similarly diagnosed Stein's writing as "palilalia," "a form of speech disorder in which the patient repeats many times a word, a

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phrase or a sentence which he has just spoken” (“Palilalia” 1711), making Stein’s writing the mere issue of her pathological body. We may smile at 1930s science articles with titles like “Gertrude Stein Explained,” but they beautifully capture the terms on which we must be suspicious of Stein’s repetition; it is anti-innovative because it is anti-productive; what masquerades as artistic production is mere bodily effluvium. Indeed, as recently as Janet Malcolm’s 2007 biography *Two Lives*, we see the same image of composition as an excretion of the body—an image more or less consistent with Stein’s own theory of composition—but framed in the most disapproving terms: “Stein didn’t even type her work; she just oozed into her notebooks and Toklas did the rest” (41). Tut, tut.

Malcolm’s invocation of typing as a potentially productive form of repetitive female labor—notably, the labor undertaken by Toklas, the same person who did much of Stein’s housework—brings into focus the economic dimension of our propensity to ridicule Stein, and the moral opprobrium implicit in it: to read Stein’s anti-innovative non-labor as a “classic” might amount to no more than what the *JAMA* editorialist calls a “hoax” (1711). Or as Stafford puts it: “is she ‘kidding’ her readers or is her stuff just ‘nerts?’” (134).⁴ (That’s N-E-R-T-S, a colloquialism meaning “crazy.”) This writing, specifically its repetition or “palilalia,” invites being read as *cheating*, as an unfair or illegal economic transaction that leaves us feeling “ripped off.” More recently, Helga Lénárt-Cheng has argued that repetition in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* serves as a manipulative advertising ploy, “a powerful means to influence the audience’s opinion about herself” (128). Lénárt-Cheng’s reproach is implicit but clear: the deceitful deployment of repetition in *Alice B. Toklas* renders the audience unable to evaluate accurately Stein’s oeuvre of what the *Durham Herald* in 1933 called a “repetitive wrangle of words” (qtd. in Lénárt-Cheng 120).

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“Conscious of the powerful influence of repetition,” Lénárt-Cheng writes, “Stein actually carried out her own self-promoting advertising campaign under the guise of character development” (129). Repetition here is both the means and end of a robbery: the lulling effects of repetition make us believe that a literary oeuvre characterized primarily by repetition can be good art. What a rip-off!

In deliberately taking up the persona of Gertrude Stein, Genius, then, Stein formalizes and literalizes the literary history of “innovation,” revealing not only its potential to self-destruct but also the faith that we implicitly place in it. Stein’s repetition has often been read as the modeling of a feminine temporality, and I would not contest this reading. But as her courting of literary progress narratives suggests, this is not a theory of an “alternative” feminine temporality that exists apart from the national time and the heroic literary histories modeled upon it, as perhaps we might see Woolf pointing out in her story of the elderly woman. Instead, Stein uses repetition to dilate the fundamental incommensurability between what Julia Kristeva once called “Women’s Time” and national history, forcing us to confront the absurdity, and the challenge to the value of *production*, that must descend upon us if we insist on maintaining the contradiction. For Stein, there is no possibility of excluding the old woman and her repetitive daily living from history; “[e]ither nothing is worth writing about or everything is worth writing about. That anybody can understand” (“What Is English Literature” 210). That such a leveling gesture should be interpreted as theft, sloth, and deceit suggests to us the challenges of operating “against innovation”; more importantly, the ubiquity of Stein-ridicule in the twentieth century brings into relief the power with which Stein’s repetition *does* operate against innovation. Lénárt-Cheng quotes a moment in *Alice B. Toklas* in which Stein writes, “My sentences do get under their skin” (qtd. in Lénárt-Cheng 129). For Lénárt-Cheng, this is insidious. For us, today, let us simply say that it is true.⁵ □

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Notes

¹ By “myth,” Krauss does not simply mean “falsity.” She rehearses the temporal dimension of the myth imputed to that repetitive visual structure, the grid, when she writes that “[b]y ‘discovering’ the grid, cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian, Malevich . . . landed in a place that was out of reach of everything that went before. Which is to say, they landed in the present, and everything else was declared to be the past” (10). Krauss calls the grid’s repetition a myth in the structuralist sense that it does a certain cultural *work*: it renders safe and digestible a fundamental contradiction, in this case the contradiction between matter, visible in the grid’s industrial ordinariness, and spirit, visible in the grid’s infinite extensibility and self-similarity (12-3). Without pushing the parallels too far, we can that Stein, who was intermittently celebrated as—or accused of—being a kind of literary cubist, does a similar kind of work in that her repetition contains the grounds of both transgression and ridicule. But I digress.

² To see this model confirmed in our own daily lives we might look to the specialized genre of what I call “get offa my lawn criticism,” a popular mode in which cranky people take to the pages of the *New York Times* to mourn the passing of Very Serious Literature by authors like Dickens and Twain. The quotidian becomes classic purely as a function of its pastness.

³ See Chapter 7 of *Syncopations*, “Every Day Another Vanguard.”

⁴ “Nerts”: “‘Nuts’, crazy.” (*OED Online*.)

⁵ Scott Selisker and Noel Jackson generously read and commented this talk before I delivered it, for which I am very grateful. I regret that in the time available to me I was not able to develop Noel’s sharp insight that the status of the joke mediates between Stein’s repetitions “against innovation” and the joke/serious panel “Against Innovation.” Noel observes that the form of the joke, which both tickles and stings, characterizes what is singular about Stein’s anti-innovation, and is therefore “an important neglected complement to the more familiar claim that ‘innovation’ must be resisted in the name of critique.”

I also received wonderful questions during and after the panel itself, only a few of which I can now remember with any hope of accuracy. Margaret Ronda raised the question of variation in Stein’s repetition (i.e. Stein’s claim that repetition is never really repetition because the fact of repetition introduces a change in emphasis) and the role that it might play in revaluing (rather than, let us say, leveling or *devaluing*) function-words and the elements of grammar. Joshua Schuster asked whether we might see Stein’s nonproductivity as a sort of automatic (mechanized) overproductivity. Hours later it occurred to me that, yes, this is the case, insofar as that mechanical overproduction is itself a form of cheapness. I am grateful to Scott Selisker, Gabriel Hankins, Leif Sorensen, and others for their questions.

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