

## **Forming Unity in Modernity: The Use of Collage in *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land***

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*Esmé Hogeveen looks at two modernists who might well have arrived on Earth from different planets—Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot. While both writers struggle with how to make art from a fractured reality, Stein’s *Tender Buttons* addresses this at a very basic level of representation, and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* works at the level of cultural history. What unites them, Hogeveen persuasively argues, is their logic, the logic of collage. Eliot and Stein seem to arrive at different solutions, then, but use a single aesthetic. Or, it may well be that the aesthetic of collage is the solution. It’s not just the confusion of modernism, then, or the end point these writers reach in struggling with that confusion, but the process they go through en route.*

- Dr. Leonard Diepeveen

In their respective poems *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land*, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot use collage as a means to depict the decay of meaning in modern life. Stein and Eliot find the more formally cohesive aesthetics of the past unable to convey the meanings portrayed in the present, and so they turn to collage. Operating both as an aesthetic technique and as a philosophic conception, collage is able to contain the contradictions of modern life through its cut-and-paste approach to configuring oppositional logic. Stein and Eliot's use of collage are not meant to confuse the reader for the sake of affirming the destabilization of meaning in the twentieth century. Rather, they are attempting to move beyond the crisis of dissociative meaning and linguistic assumption to find contemporary meta-narratives of sense through which language can be newly grounded. While Stein dissects the surface qualities of words and Eliot uses a more historically referential method to examine the potential for writing modern epics, both poets engage in a uniquely modern questioning of, and break from, representational art. In *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land*, both poet and reader are required to engage in a simultaneous destruction and construction of meaning. This necessitates a recognition of the importance of perspective in truth-formation in the modern context. By requiring the reader to interpret the collage of ideas and meanings presented in *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land*, Stein and Eliot demonstrate the possibility of forming new grounds for objectivity out of cultural, societal and technological fragmentation. Despite differences in approach, both poems reflect the necessity of the collage aesthetic as a tool for cultivating both connection and meaning in modernity.

Scholarly criticism concerned with elucidating the use of the collage aesthetic in modernist poetry often seeks recourse in examining the contemporary evolution of collage as portrayed in visual art. The artistic movements of cubism, dadaism and surrealism are frequently associated with changing attitudes towards opposition in modernist poetry. Stein in particular is associated with the artists whom she housed and developed relationships with during her residence at the famous 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris, which was also the location of the modern art collection she shared with her brother, Leo Stein, from 1903 to 1938 (Giroud 9). During her time as an American expatriate in Paris, Stein developed a particular interest in the work of Pablo Picasso,

whose innovations in cubism became the style to which her poetry is most often compared. Eliot's "complicated system of echoes, contrasts, parallels, and allusions" in *The Waste Land* is also frequently studied for its correlations to contemporary art movements (Korg 465). In his article, "Modernism and the Collage Aesthetic," Budd Hopkins argues that collage is "an aesthetic position that can suffuse virtually any expressive medium" (5). Hopkins suggests that Picasso's creation of "art history's first collage," *Still Life With Chair Canning* in 1911, established collage as "a complex new hybrid in which the philosophical core of modernism received its most literal expression" (5). Hopkins believes that collage is the most appropriate form of expression for the twentieth century:

Ours is a disturbingly pluralistic world in which we deal with infinitely more information, more contradictory social roles, more diverse 'realities' than in any previous century. The smooth, continuous, unruffled space of older representational art is not appropriate to the disjunctions of our typical life experience. Consciously or unconsciously, contemporary artists work to create harmony from distinctly jarring material, forcing warring ideas, materials and spatial systems into a tense and perhaps arbitrary détente. Seen most broadly, the presence of the collage aesthetic is the sole defining quality of modernism in all the arts. (6)

This description of early twentieth century life illuminates the context in which Stein and Eliot write *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land*. In both poems the poets are compelled to reject the style of representational art because its creation of universal thematic and formal cohesion is inadequate to describing the disjunctive realities of modernity.

To describe the context of collage's conception, Hopkins contrasts *Still Life With Chair Canning* to an earlier nude by impressionist painter Pierre Renoir. Hopkins "[accepts] the Renoir's smooth, virtually perfect unity now because of its *distance* from our sense of reality. For its admirers it is a lovely escapist dream, far from our jarringly complex modern reality. By comparison, the Picasso work embraces the disjunctive nature of that reality – in a sense illustrating it – yet managing at the same time to achieve a kind of tense harmony" (6). Here, Hopkins goes a long way towards describing the aims of Stein and Eliot. In comparing these modern art schools and modern poetry, it is significant to note that they are all centrally concerned with developing a heightened consciousness about the given qualities of their materiality – that is, the arrangement of images in art, and the arrangement of words in poetry. Not only is it important to recall that modern art and literature are in dialogue with each other for the sake of contextual awareness, but by conceiving of poetry as word-paintings, the reader is better equipped to analyze the ways in which Stein and Eliot re-evaluate the efficacy of conventional poetry styles. In order to depict the contradictions of modern life, they turn to collage.

*Tender Buttons* has a long history of baffling scholars, critics, and the general public. This history can largely be attributed to a widely held belief that its premise is a logic of nonsense. Recognition of cubism's influence on Stein has led to a popular

opinion that her “denial of the importance of subject matter [in favour of style]...can lead to extremes of aestheticism that are not acceptable to some of the most style-conscious critics” (Fitz 234). However, an interesting counter-argument has emerged founded on the theory that modern art's effect on Stein has been largely misunderstood. Michael Edward Kaufmann testifies to the integrity of the latter position, arguing that

the misperceived affinities of [Stein's] work with Cubism and Dadaism have led many critics to assess incorrectly her intent in *Tender Buttons*...[it] is neither a collection of verbal Cubist still-lives nor an exposing of the nonsense of structure in language. She wants not to create nonsense, but to subvert the non-sense that language – after its centuries of encasement in print – has become. Language, Stein shows, is no longer an instrument of perception but has become an instrument of culture that obscures perception. (447-48)

In contrast to reductive interpretations of *Tender Buttons*, which claim it is simply an exercise in linguistic free-association and unstructured wordplay, there emerges a more dynamic interpretation. This interpretation conceives of *Tender Buttons* as being, in fact, an attempted portrait of modern life much like *The Waste Land*. Unlike Eliot, who affirms the veracity of historical forms of poetry and epic prose as means of depicting the corrosion of truth and unity in the twentieth century, Stein does not trust words to convey her specific meanings. Stein distrusts words because of the way they have acquired identities independent of singular representations. This can be seen in her definition of “Mutton” in which she writes: “A meal in mutton, mutton, why is lamb cheaper, it is because so little is more. Lecture, lecture and repeat instruction” (Stein 185). Mutton is depicted not only as a type of meat, but also as a socio-economic signifier. The line “lecture, lecture and repeat instruction” could be interpreted as a reference to mutton's chewy texture, whose consumption requires careful mastication. Thus in her description of mutton's multiple identities, Stein also comments on her method of slowly chewing over individual words in order to get beyond the associative and assumptive conjecture attached to them. Stein seeks to “delineate objects and character according to surfaces” (Fitz 323). This surface evaluation is intimately connected to Picasso's use of the cubist style, in which “Picasso limits himself to what is seen and not what is reconstructed from memory” (232). In *Tender Buttons*, Stein applies the same approach to words, “[coming] to view words as things in themselves, [while] denying the objects for which the words traditionally stood symbol” (234). As such, Stein's linguistic inquiry is not limited to exploding the identities of individual words. She is also interested in “the way [words sound] ... the look of the printed line on the page” believing that “[punctuation] markings on the page [are] of value not as symbols for objects, but as decorations” (235). *Tender Buttons'* etymological concern is therefore not for the sake of destabilizing meaning, but an effort to re-establish linguistic objectivity.

Stein's study of word history and association in *Tender Buttons* necessitates the use of collage as a means of presenting the meaning she finds. To artificially conform her examinations of words into a linear system would be counter-productive to Stein's

attempt to distil the truth of words' superficial qualities. In questioning the logic of existing systems of categorization within the domestic, female world, Stein divides *Tender Buttons* into three such categories: "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms." Aside from this denotation, Stein does not adhere to any formal or pre-given forms of poetic organization. Instead she creates a collage of ideas and associations pertaining to each subject she examines within the three sections. These investigations feature word histories, puns, repetition and, in some cases, complex intertextual relationships with other sections of the poem. Stein's aim is to expose the arbitrariness of conventional categories. This is seen in the opening section of "Food" which begins: "ROASTBEEF; MUTTON; BREAKFAST; SUGAR; CRANBERRIES; MILK; EGGS; APPLE; TAILS; LUNCH" (Stein 182). In highlighting the seemingly forced system of logic in the arrangement of a cookbook's table of contents, Stein draws the reader's attention towards the unquestioning relationship readers often have with given word-systems. Later in the poem, at the beginning of "Rooms," Stein orders the reader to abandon attempts to conform thoughts into unifying systems. She says: "Act so that there is no use of a center" (184). Here, Stein's use of collage emerges as a technique which requires active self-questioning and interpretative constructing on the part of the reader. While Stein rejects the didacticism of traditional poetry, her definition of "Rooms" still operates as instructions for how to create personal meaning. This abandoning of old unifying systems and the re-evaluation of meaning on an individual basis reflects the alienation Stein presents as inherent to modernity.

In *The Waste Land*, apposition becomes a system of finding meaning and connectivity in the world. It is in this sense that Eliot, who shares with Stein a distrust of the assumptive tradition in literary interpretation, uses collage as a means of finding unifying logic within the paradoxical context of the twentieth century. Rather than examining the myriad of meanings associated with individual words like Stein does, Eliot uses collage to develop a nonlinear and atemporal sequence of images and allusions to depict the fallen state of post-World War I Europe. From the first lines of *The Waste Land* it is clear that Eliot is presenting an unconventional interpretation of the traditional association of spring with fertility and renewal:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot 474)

Eliot is concerned with the decay of reason in his present. Near the beginning of the first section of *The Waste Land*, "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot addresses this concern explicitly with the question: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" (474). And he answers himself: "A heap of broken images" (474). Eliot expresses the feeling that causal logic is no longer appropriate in the context of post-war destruction and the accompanying cultural collapse of meaning. It makes sense that he can only progress in *The Waste Land* by using a non-traditional form to

convey his meaning. Eliot thus presents collage as an adequate form for depicting the fractured landscape of the twentieth century.

In analyzing Eliot's use of collage, it is important to remember the specificity of the fragments he includes. While the layout of *The Waste Land* is neither chronologically nor thematically linear, it is, like *Tender Buttons*, organized into sections. Each section has specific internal themes and there are also overarching motifs which recur throughout the poem. Interpreting and linking this collage of ideas becomes the reader's task. Eliot seems to explicitly suggest this through the recurrent theme of characters engaging in a questioning of truth, truth's origins, and the integrity of the sources of truth. In "The Burial of the Dead", Eliot writes,

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men. (476)

In these lines, Eliot gestures towards the contemporary confusion that supersedes conventional questions of veracity. This is evident in the speaker's obscured identity and abundance of questions, none of which, interestingly, address the obvious question of how a corpse could beget new life. Other questions derive from the capitalized "D" in "Dog." Is "Dog" an anagram for "God," making this passage symbolic of the fallen state of man? Does it suggest the absence of a central source of goodness and truth generation? Or does "Dog" allude to the political threat of other European powers? Or could it, as the editor's footnote suggests, represent "Anubis (the dog-headed Egyptian god of the underworld who helped Isis reassemble her dismembered brother Osiris)" or another mythical figure (476)? None of these questions is ever directly answered in the poem, but by asking them Eliot compels the reader to construct an informed response based on the information provided through the collage of high and low cultural allusions. In this way, Eliot's metaphor of a corpse conjuring new life is rendered possible by virtue of reader participation.

If *The Waste Land* suggests the possibility of locating multi-faceted truths through combining multiple allusions and images into more complex hybrid-like relations, it is directly aligned with the logical systems proposed in *Tender Buttons*. Stein's poem specifically does not represent allusions as historically verified truths. Instead, it breaks down associative narratives. The goal of this is to find a unity amongst multiple meanings that does not force a conflation between their diversity, but rather finds a way to hold them all together while recognizing their independence. Eliot does this by creating characters who are composites of various fragmented descriptions, such as the blind wise-man who is connected with the Greek prophet Tiresias. Eliot presents this compositional character as the twentieth century version of an epic's narrating guide. Jacob Korg, in his article, "Modern Art Techniques in the Waste Land," comments on Eliot's creation of characters built from a collage of references and imagery, saying "the effect of double

image is achieved through ambiguous symbols, allusions, the exploitation of physical resemblances, and quotations which are made to fit new applications. Thus, Mr. Eugenides, because he is one-eyed, is also the merchant in the Tarot pack, and because he is half-blind, has a certain relationship to Tiresias” (462). Eliot's creation of a narrator with an obscured identity emerges as a self-consciously important theme in *The Waste Land*, as the poem itself reflects on “the grand epic poetry of the past, in which a narrator (Dante, Milton, Homer) functions as a reliable guide to amazing events” (Hopkins 8). By the time Eliot writes *The Waste Land* in 1919, he thinks the potential for such stable narrating figures “has all but disappeared” (8). Eliot's response to this is to create a poetic form which invites the reader to connect puzzle-like references into a new and distinctly modern whole.

The sense in *The Waste Land* of actively creating complex understandings of new kinds of truth connects to Kaufmann's suggestion that *Tender Buttons* is a “narrative of naming...simply a narrative of the mind encountering language and print” (450). Naming, for Stein, means acknowledging the multitude of identities connected to a word. The first object Stein analyzes in “Objects” is “a carafe, that is a blind glass” (Stein 180). Stein describes the carafe as “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” (180). Seeking to interpret direction in these lines for how to read *Tender Buttons* seems antithetical to Stein's intention of doing away with reductive assumption-style interpreting. However, given the poem's collage-like structure, it also seems irresponsible not to examine each section in its relation to the others. If Stein is truly working from a cubist framework, then “every page is literally as important to the work as every other page, just as every part of a cubist painting is as important as every other part” (Fitz 231). If, as Fitz claims, Cubism features a “total lack of a focal point”, then Stein's carafe, an empty jar whose purpose is to contain and reveal substance, is a profound metaphor for how *Tender Buttons* itself reveals the ways in which individual words contain a multiplicity of meanings (231). Both *Tender Buttons* and *The Waste Land* require a mode of egalitarian interpretation, which finds each aspect of the collage an equally important part of the whole.

The success of collage can be seen in how Stein and Eliot investigate the ambiguity of given truths. In Stein's case, the ambiguity of specific words and phrases upon which broader linguistic ideas are founded suggests that creating compositional expressions can result in sum-greater-than-its-parts logic. Feminist critic Marguerite Murphy claims “we find in *Tender Buttons* 'a struggle and dialogic interrelationship' between the 'authoritative' word and the 'internally persuasive' word, that is, a private word established at the expense of the word of authority by undercutting the latter's 'truth' through irony, parody, or some sort of semantic or representational subversion” (386). Murphy comments on the way in which Stein examines the subjects of “eggs” and “milk” throughout the poem in light of both their independent and their interdependent meanings and associations. The “Food” section's definition of “Custard” includes a recipe which requires the cooking together of eggs and milk. Murphy claims, “the 'recipe' ends with the assertion that '[custard] is better than seeding,' that is, lesbian love is better than heterosexual love where 'seeding' occurs” (397). While Murphy's contention has

substantial hypothetical validity – Stein is known to frequently invoke lesbianism in her writing – it is interesting to consider that this is only one of the many intricately developed thematic overlappings in the poem and only one of its possible interpretations. This can be compared to the way in which *The Waste Land* opens itself up to a variety of interpretations. Korg writes,

The dominant figures of the Grail Knight, the Fisher King, and Tiresias, all taken from well-developed traditions of their own, appear only sporadically. The two women in 'A Game of Chess' have no actual connection with each other, but the poem relates them within its own design as two contrasting illustrations of the failure of love in modern society. Their stories, as they stand, are incomplete; yet in the context of the poem they form a completion larger than themselves. (456)

The specificity of both Stein's and Eliot's overlapping of ideas and themes throughout their poems opposes a traditional account of historicity as linear. This overhauling of the conventional approach to poetry and art, which involves each aspect of a work reinforcing every other aspect to create a single unified meaning, seemingly are Stein and Eliot's answers as to how to create meaning out of modern disunity.

According to Murphy, “on the whole, interpretive criticism of *Tender Buttons* has tended to be cumulative, each reader discerning new possible codes of stories behind these very open, indeterminate texts, without such readings being mutually exclusive” (384). The same principle applies to *The Waste Land*, which develops its logic out of the author and reader's active efforts to hold the variety of conflicting fragments together as a new kind of whole. Collage is therefore neither a compartmentalization of meaning nor a representation of unity as irreparably fractured, but a conscious effort to see interconnectivity and truth amidst the complexities of twentieth century life.

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