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"The Difference" of Objects "Is Spreading": A Non-Anthropocentric Reading of *Tender Buttons*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the nonreferentiality of both language and the object in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* through an analysis of "Book.," a section of the chapter "Objects." While the inaccessibility of *Tender Buttons* is well known due to Stein's linguistic experimentalism, the objects presented as section titles also challenge conventional perceptions of the "object" by encompassing non-material and living entities. These title-objects remain largely obscure, as they are partially described but simultaneously left largely undescribed throughout the text. At the same time, other objects continue to appear with a similar kind of inaccessibility, and consequently the text remains elusive despite the scholarly attention it has received since its publication in 1914. *Tender Buttons* thus suggests that language cannot be entirely controlled, nor can objects be fully possessed from an anthropocentric perspective. In this regard, a recognition of strangeness when encountering objects in the text may be viewed as a step toward perceiving a lesser-known aspect of reality in which, to modify Stein's manifesto, "[t]he difference" of objects "is spreading."

1 | Introduction

Over a century ago, Gertrude Stein refused to take the traditional sense of linguistic referentiality for granted, and her prose poem *Tender Buttons* (1914) stands as evidence of her linguistic experimentation. It is still hard to deny that the majority of *Tender Buttons* remains, and will likely continue to remain, almost indecipherable. The inaccessibility of the text may appear contradictory given the public attention to its publication. According to Diepeveen (2008, 199–200), who investigated Stein's contemporary newspaper reviews, *Tender Buttons* "[generated] what is probably the most voluminous response to any modernist text, within a couple years" of its publication. However, the reactions of the general readership were invariably unfavorable, as indicated by words such as "insane," "nonsense," and "crazy" (Diepeveen 2008, 199). The reviews, repeating negative reactions, treated *Tender Buttons* not as a text worthy of scrutiny but instead as sensational news material or, in other words, an "event" (Diepeveen 2008, 199–201). Similarly, the critical attention the text deserves was not fully realized until the emergence of feminist and postmodernist criticism (Dickie 1997, 19; Dekoven 1999, 186). Before this period, attention was directed to Stein's biographical aspects rather than to her own literary achievements (Dekoven 1999, 186).

A primary reason for these historical responses to *Tender Buttons* derives from Stein's rejection of language as a conduit for meaning and her reconceptualization of its intrinsic value. Her view of language was not congruent with the "linguistic turn," the dominant perspective on language in her time. According to Bell (1999, 16), this intellectual current held that "rather than describing or reflecting the world, language was now seen to form it." Bell (1999, 16–18) discusses multiple aspects of the "linguistic turn," highlighting the creation of "an epochal ambiguity" of literary texts, its alignment with philosophical views of language, and the redefinition of language as "the pervasive

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metaphor." Nevertheless, the referentiality of language was not fundamentally called into question. On the other hand, Stein's work, especially *Tender Buttons*, as Davidson (1984) puts it, presents "a language that no longer needs to contain the world in order to live in it" (197), and for this reason, he argues that "[w]e must learn to read *writing*, not read *meanings*" (198). Nicholls (1995, 202) also emphasizes the nonreferentiality and the "texture of writing" in Stein's work, asserting that "Stein, we might say, invents another version of modernism," which the "men of 1914," might find "decadent."

Despite the recognition of Stein's linguistic experimentalism, the meaning in her texts, whether denied or sought, might still persist as a central concern. Davidson (1984, 196–197) observes that the two most persistent criticisms concerning Stein, though "antithetical," remain confined within "a referential paradigm" in that "one wants her to mean nothing and the other wants her to mean intrinsically." The first criticism emphasizes the nature of "play" in her writing, influenced by William James, motor automatism, and Cubism, whereas the second redefines Stein as "a kind of hermetic Symbolist who encodes sexual and biographical information in complex verbal machines" (Davidson 1984, 196–197). Although Davidson (1984, 196) does not mention postmodernity, the word "play" evokes its sensibility; it is no coincidence that Stein was later realigned as a "postmodernist," as indicated by Schmitz (1974) in the title of his article: "Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of 'Tender Buttons'." Stein's affiliation with postmodernism is also evinced by the inclusion of Davidson's essay on her writing in a volume on Language Poetry, an avant-garde poetic movement that emerged during the postmodern era. The second approach is exemplified by Margaret Dickie's interpretation of *Tender Buttons* as Stein's "real and unique contribution to that [the modernist] period—an erotic poetry of considerable variety and power" (Dickie 1997, 19). From this perspective, Dickie (1997) argues that Stein did not reject linguistic representation but wrote in "coded language" (19), such as using "dirt" or "dirty" to subtly reveal her sexual identity (29).

Despite his critique of "a referential paradigm," Davidson (1984, 197) acknowledges "possibilities for meaning" inherent in *Tender Buttons*, as it questions "the equation of word and thing." From this point of view, he draws attention to the ways in which objects are represented: "The objects themselves are commonplace—as common as the carafes, bowls and guitars of Cubist still lifes—but Stein's disjunctive prose removes them from their commonality and accentuates the gap between object and description" (197). While objects remain merely "possible substitute[s]" for words in Davidson's view (197), this paper affords them further consideration, aiming to demonstrate that *Tender Buttons* combines the nonreferentiality of not only language but also objects. Just like the elusive nature of Stein's language, objects may appear familiar and ordinary at first glance, yet they eventually emerge as entities that resist conventional human perception.

2 | Strange, Familiar Objects

Tender Buttons is almost impossible to decipher, but not because it is always nonsensical. Each word that Stein (1998, 313) uses to form her sentences is, taken individually, "nothing strange," and some sentences convey meaning, albeit in fragments, when examined independently. Yet the overall sequence of sentences and their structures appear "not ordinary" (313), as they violate standard grammatical and structural norms and lack clear logical connections. Sherwood Anderson's brother captures the paradoxical coexistence of strangeness and familiarity in *Tender Buttons* as follows: "It gives words an oddly new intimate flavor and at the same time makes familiar words seem almost like strangers, doesn't it" (Anderson 1990, 1)[1]. While the sense of oddity arising from otherwise plain words reduces the accessibility of *Tender Buttons*, the same ambivalence is observed in the 58 entries of "Objects," one of its three chapters. Most of them are ordinary, functional, and human-made materials. Their significance, however, has not always been easily recognized. According to Pitchford (1999, 650–656), the value of the mass-produced objects in the domestic sphere in the text was not discernible to Stein's contemporary modernists, as the fusion of consumer culture, gendered space, and high art was not in accordance with the binary oppositions underlying the autonomy theories prevalent at the time. Even if, as Pitchford's (1999, 650) argues, Stein's strategy for using these objects is acknowledged to be "central to the radical experimentalism of *Tender Buttons*," the title-objects themselves remain unilluminated in the following descriptive passages. For example, in "A carafe, that is, a blind glass." perhaps the most well-known section of "Objects," the presence of a "carafe," whether real or metaphorical, can hardly be recognized in a passage such as "a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing" (Stein 1998, 313).

Furthermore, the use of the following entities as section titles challenges conventional perceptions of objects as material: "A method of a cloak." (Stein 1998, 316), "A frightful release." (Stein 1998, 320), "More." (Stein 1998, 320), "Water raining." (Stein 1998, 322), "Cold climate." (Stein 1998, 322), "A time to eat." (Stein 1998, 322), "In between." (Stein 1998, 323), "A brown." (Stein 1998, 323), "A sound." (Stein 1998, 324), and "A leave." (Stein 1998, 325). More notably, living entitles such as a plant, an animal, and even humans are also included in the same chapter: "Red roses." (Stein 1998, 323), "A little called Pauline." (Stein 1998, 324), "A dog." (Stein 1998, 325), and "A white hunter." (Stein 1998, 325). The classification of humans as objects may not seem extraordinary today; the divide between the human/subject and the nonhuman/object has been reconfigured, especially from posthumanist perspectives, by scholars such as Haraway (2016), Hayles (1999, 2017), Bennet (2010), and Barad (2003), among others, who have reconceptualized humanity as a hybrid entity that integrates elements conventionally defined as nonhuman. The dualistic way of thinking can no longer be sustainable, as Latour (1993, 136) notes: "So long as humanism is constructed through contrast with the object that has been abandoned to epistemology, neither the human nor the nonhuman can be understood."

Stein's reconceptualization of objects does not simply reflect the aforementioned non-anthropocentric perspectives but further echoes Harman's (2018) redefinition of objects. As the founder of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), he not only deprivileges the human and relocates it as an equal entity in the category of objects but also extends their scope: "All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural,

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cultural, real or fictional" (2018, 9). The principle of "equal attention" does not necessarily guarantee an understanding of objects, because the "*withdrawal* or *withholding* of things from direct access is the central principle of OOO" (Harman 2018, 7). It is thus not surprising that Harman (2018, 257) emphasizes the irreducibility of objects to "the two basic kinds of knowledge: what something is made of, and what it does." Given this philosophical perspective, the obscurity of conventional objects in *Tender Buttons*, as well as the inclusion of non-material and living entities as objects, can be viewed not as anomalous, but rather as pertaining to the nature of the object as yet undiscovered. Simultaneously, however, Stein does not appear to explore the irreducible object, nor does she endeavor to attain "an esthetic of realization, a pursuit of the thing in itself" (489), which Lodge (1991) identifies as her aim. He differentiates Stein from the Dadaists and William Burroughs regarding their objectives: "where their aim is to affront human rationality, and/or to demonstrate the capacity of nature to generate its own meanings without human interpretation, hers [Stein's] is not. She still maintains the traditional stance of the artist" (488–489).

A purpose of Stein's writing may be inferred from "Poetry and Grammar" in which she (2007, 31–32) employs the terms, "a thing in itself" and "the thing in itself." In the first instance, she writes:

> And so I went on with this exceeding struggle of knowing really knowing what a thing was really knowing it knowing anything I was seeing anything was feeling so that its name could be something, by its name coming to be a thing in itself as it was but would not be anything just and only as a name.
>
> (Stein 2007, 31)

The term, "a thing in itself," reappears in the following passage quoted by Lodge (1991, 489) as evidence of Stein's pursuit of the "Symbolist poetic." She states, "I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name" (Stein 2007, 31). Three paragraphs later, Stein uses the term, "the thing in itself," when discussing "real narrative" (Stein 2007, 32):

> real narrative must of necessity be told by any one having come to the realization that the noun must be replaced not by inner balance but by the thing in itself and that will eventually lead to everything. I am working at this thing and what will it do this I do not know but I hope that I will know.
>
> (Stein 2007, 32)

Given Stein's writing style, it is not surprising that the meaning of the Kantian terms remains uncrystallized. Nevertheless, they are consistently aligned with "anything" (31), "everything" (32) or "anything and everything" (31) in contesting a "name" (31) and a "noun" (32), which, for Stein (2007), serve to reinforce conventional referentiality. The first passage suggests that a "name" could indicate "something," which might approach ("coming to be") "a thing in itself" but eventually remains "a name," not becoming "anything" (Stein 2007, 31). The term "a thing in itself" in the second passage proves to be "anything and everything," which Stein "intensely" wishes to write about "without at all necessarily using its name" (Stein 2007, 31). In the third passage, Stein rather straightforwardly devalues a "noun" as opposed to "the thing in itself," which is in line with "everything" (32).

Any object Stein describes may appear consistently withdrawn, as its meaning remains inaccessible in a manner that evokes the Kantian concept of the thing-in-itself. Nevertheless, despite Lodge's (1991) argument about Stein's aim, the quotations suggest that she rather reconceives the terms as a source that generates unlimited, albeit still unknowable, meanings, which spread to such an extent that they may encompass "anything and everything" (Stein 2007, 31), resonating with the OOO definition of objects as "any entity whatsoever" (Morton 2012, 205). As a result, the "gap between object and description" (Davidson 1984, 297) inevitably widens in *Tender Buttons*, and therefore the anthropocentric paradigm is challenged. The following reading of "Book." as a case study demonstrates an effect of Stein's linguistic practice, even if inadvertent, that realizes a condition of unknowing in which objects we presume to know assume the status of strange entities.

3 | Case Study: "Book."

> (A) Book was there, it was there. Book was there. (B) Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and (C) it was not where it was wet, (D) it was not high, (E) it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, (F) it put a bank, a bank when, a bank care.
>
> (Stein 1998, 325–326)

Quartermain (1992) offers perhaps the most thorough analysis of this first paragraph from the perspective of disjunctive poetics, which is also the title of his book. He examines the 11 occurrences of the pronoun "it," exploring their potential meanings within the "anaphoric/deictic pattern" or the "cohesion (linking) of patterns" (26). He then designates "it was needless" as a major transitional point, marking a shift toward linguistic nonreferentiality, textual self-referentiality, and a "text-intrinsic system," and points to "it put a bank" as the climax of a "non-sensical proposition" (26). For Quartermain, this is a way to "read with an eye to the play of language and of meaning rather than with an eye to referentiality and the communication of meaning" (26). In other words, he does not view "Book." as representational but rather as linguistically generative in and of itself.

When this section is revisited with a focus on objects, a sense of strangeness cannot be overlooked in both the title and the opening sentence. Although the section title refers to an ordinary countable object, a "book," the appropriate article is omitted. "Book." remains prominent amid the ambiguity of *Tender Buttons* since there are only three section titles that have no article: "Cold climate." (Stein 1998, 322), "Book." (Stein 1998,

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325), and "Peeled pencil, choke." (Stein 1998, 326). Quartermain (1992, 24) suggests that the grammatical deviation may lead to the recognition of the title "as word, as evocation of a semantic field, rather than as object." However, as he also points out "*book*'s placement" and "*there*ness" in Part A (24), the identity of "it" may not be understood as entirely nonmaterial, particularly in this sentence: "it was there." While Part A may be interpreted as referring to a "book" despite its unconventional form, Part B introduces a new object, "a cleaner, a wet cleaner," so that "it" in Part C may refer to either of them. The loosening of the connection between the title and the description is further intensified in Part D, as the condition of being "not high" is hardly applicable to either a "book" or "a cleaner, a wet cleaner" in any general sense. On the other hand, Part E could signify both objects or "anything and everything" (Stein 2007, 31), which are no longer needed and are therefore returned to their owner or to their proper place. Then, Part F, as Quartermain (1992) notes, appears to maximize the nonreferentiality. This part introduces a new object, "a bank," followed by the strange arrangement of familiar words marked by the unconventional placement of a comma: "a bank when, a bank care" (Stein 1998, 326). Simultaneously, however, Part F is not entirely disconnected from the title. The combination of the section title and "a bank" (Stein 1998, 326) form the compound, a "bankbook," which, though not a "book" in the conventional sense, can be associatively linked to it. In this way, a "book" is partially described but simultaneously left largely undescribed at the grammatical, syntactic, and interpretive levels; consequently, it becomes momentarily perceptible, only to ultimately recede.

Quartermain (1992, 26) suggests that the text may appear "fairly straightforward" after the first paragraph, once we become accustomed to his disjunctive approach to the text. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that the "gap between object and description" (Davidson 1984, 297) becomes increasingly conspicuous in the following passages. From the second paragraph onward, expressions that evoke a "book" become notably fewer or more fragmented:

> Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head does that mean soap. It does not so. It means kind wavers and little chance to beside beside rest. A plain.
>
> Suppose ear rings, that is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest a pillar. Chest not valuable, be papered.
>
> Cover up cover up the two with a little piece of string and hope rose and green, green.
>
> Please a plate, put a match to the seam and really then really then, really then it is a remark that joins many many lead games. It is a sister and sister and a flower and a flower and a dog and a colored sky a sky colored grey and nearly that nearly that let.
>
> (Stein 1998, 326)

The interpretations of Quartermain (1992) and Schmitz (1974) no longer seem to take a "book" into consideration. While Quartermain regards the second paragraph as "a conventional description of a banker" (27), Schmitz sees in the second and third paragraphs "a remonstrance vaguely suggestive of sexual jealousy" (1211). Regardless of whether their interpretations are accepted, it should be noted how a "book" is simultaneously glimpsed and withdrawn. First, the shadow of a "book" might be detected from the words such as "white," "papered," "cover," and "a little piece of string" (Stein 1998, 326). While the first three words, albeit vaguely, may be associated with elements of a book, such as the white pages and the cover, the last word can evoke the traditional craftsmanship of bookmaking. Nevertheless, the contextual meanings of these words depend on other words that have no bearing on a "book." The meaning of "white" cannot be deciphered, as it is merely associated with "a realistic expression," which also remains obscure (Stein 1998, 326). The other words, "papered" and "cover," function as verbs, modifying "chest" and "the two with a little piece of string," respectively (Stein 1998, 326). While the phrase "chest not valuable" seems unrelated to a "book," the referent of "the two" remains unidentified in this context (Stein 1998, 326).

It is important to note that as the presence of a "book" has diminished, other objects have come to the forefront. Some of these are familiar materials, such as "soap," "ear rings," "nice old pole," "a pillar," "a little piece of string," "a plate," "a match," and "the seam" (Stein 1998, 326). Similar to a "book," these objects lack functional or contextual description; consequently, we are compelled to "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us," as Brown (2004, 4) posits. For Brown, such an encounter exemplifies the inherent "belatedness" of human thought, since we have yet to overcome subject/object dualism, thereby persisting in the belief that "thinking and thingness are distinct" (16). While Brown's conceptualization of "thing" and "object" in "Thing Theory" is not entirely interchangeable with Harman's, it can nevertheless be argued that if we find the appearance of these objects strange, this response evinces the persistence of conventional ontologies. Furthermore, Stein's reconceptualization of objects, encompassing nonmaterial and living forms, is also concretized in the following words: "a man," a "head," "wavers," "little chance," "rest," an "ear," "chest," "hope," "lead games," "a sister," "a flower," "a dog," and "a sky" (Stein 1998, 326).

Both conventional and nonconventional objects reveal neither their individual significance nor their relationship to one another in the given context. The text thus appears to reflect the autonomy of objects, which Harman (2018, 12) emphasizes as the distinction of OOO from earlier examples of entities inaccessible to humans, such as Kant's "things in themselves," Heidegger's "being," and Lacan's "Real." Harman, using Heidegger's term, argues that objects are "withdrawn" not only from humans but also from one another (12). In other words, as Morton (2012) puts it, in OOO, "objects are prior to their relations. Objects exist prior to the one 'for whom' they are fluid or static" (208). The dissemination of objects without relationality to other objects appears to extend into "anything and everything" (Stein 2007, 31), while remaining fundamentally unknowable in the text. If language itself may be acknowledged as an object, not only a "book" but also the section, "Book.," the chapter "Objects," and even *Tender Buttons* as a whole, whether conceived as a conceptual entity or as a physical book, could be regarded as a nonreferential object.[2]

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In this sense, the nonreferentiality of both language and object in *Tender Buttons* may reflect the way in which humans both perceive and fail to perceive them. Despite their familiar appearance, their meanings may be ambiguous and even indecipherable upon closer examination. In other words, *Tender Buttons* suggests that language cannot be fully controlled, nor can the object be entirely possessed. The sense of oddity we experience when reading *Tender Buttons* may, in part, derive from our resistance to non-anthropocentric perspectives of the world, whose existence cannot yet be imagined without a "name" or a "noun."[3] In this regard, a recognition of strangeness when encountering objects in the text may be viewed as a step toward perceiving a lesser-known aspect of reality in which, to modify Stein's manifesto, "[t]he difference" of objects "is spreading" (Stein 1998, 313).

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The author has nothing to report.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

Endnotes

[1] Although the brother remains unnamed in the text and in secondary references, he can be identified as Karl Anderson.

[2] In contrast to the nonreferentiality of language and object that this article explores, Colangelo (2022) underscores the "inescapable signification" of language, drawing on Stein's statement in "A Transatlantic Interview": "there is no such thing as putting them together without sense" (1376). He therefore argues that the "wordiness" of the language Stein uses ultimately thwarts her attempt to reach objects in a Heideggerian sense, or to "let be" (1379, 1386), leading merely to "object-words and word-objects, knickknacks" (1384). As Colangelo observes (1384), the objects cited in the passages refer to actual entities, and *Tender Buttons* is not entirely inaccessible, as noted earlier in this article. Yet this article emphasizes the fundamental strangeness produced by apparently familiar words and objects through Stein's unique writing style, rather than indicating a Kantian "thing-in-itself" or similar entities as the purpose of the author or the text.

[3] An anthropocentric approach to *Tender Buttons* still remains prevalent in contemporary scholarship. For example, in *Vital Stein*, Posman (2024, 156) interprets the text as "both a twist on a self-portrait and, in an abstract sense, a portrait of her generation, or, better, a portrait of the concept of a generation." It is thus not surprising that Posman understands the passage, "Book was there, it was there. Book was there," as an ordinary situation in which "you often forget where exactly you placed an object" and emphasizes the changing use of objects by arguing that "[u]se, in sum, creates a dynamic constellation" (156).
Stein's description of objects does not consistently reflect a non-anthropocentric perspective. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), for example, Stein suggests that the poem entitled "The Fifteenth of November" serves as "a portrait of T. S. Eliot" (Stein 1998, 857). According to "Alice," Stein wrote the poem after the two engage in "a solemn conversation, mostly about split infinitives and other grammatical solecisms and why Gertrude Stein used them" (Stein 1998, 857). While maintaining the ambiguity characteristic of Stein's writing style, this poem captures her perception of Eliot's character: "He said enough./ Enough said" (Eliot 1967, 74–75). After alternating between these two lines, Stein concludes the poem as follows:

> Not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken wool and woolen not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken wool and woolen not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken not only wool and woolen not only wool and woolen not only silk and silken not only silk and silken not only wool and woolen.
>
> (Eliot 1967, 75)

The meanings of the terms "wool" and "silk," along with their variants, may be neither understood nor necessary. The repetitions of these inanimate objects and the absence of "but also" reflect Eliot's speech patterns or a thematic lack of progression. In this instance, unlike in "Objects," Stein uses objects to delineate a human character.

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