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THE MAKING OF AMERICANS: LANGUAGE, PLOT, AND BEING MISTAKEN

By

Gavin Craig

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ABSTRACT

THE MAKING OF AMERICANS: LANGUAGE, PLOT, AND BEING MISTAKEN

By

Gavin Craig

While much of the critical discussion of the plot of Gertrude Stein's 1925 novel The Making of Americans has focused on apparent similarities between Stein's own family and the novel's Herslands and Dehnings, by performing a separation between the biographical/historical Gertrude Stein and the novel's unnamed, ungended narrator it becomes possible to consider the way in which the novel takes advantage of the structures and tensions of plot in order to allow the novel to resist a determinative reading reinforcing the primacy of the heterosexual reproductive family unit. By utilizing temporal and referential non-determinability in language as well as the death of David Hersland to release the narrative drive for closure, The Making of Americans is able to construct a family whose progress is from relationships defined by the heterosexual reproductive family unit to more varied forms of sociability.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. PLOT AND PLACING THE NARRATOR.....	4
II. MISTAKENNESS AND THE TEXTUAL MACHINE.....	9
III. PRONOUNS, ERROR, AND THE DEATH OF DAVID HERSLAND.....	21
WORKS CITED.....	35

Introduction

In her lecture “Poetry and Grammar,” Gertrude Stein distinguishes between her prose and her poetry, stating in effect that her work beginning with Tender Buttons falls into the latter category, after her efforts in prose found a culmination in her 1925¹ novel The Making of Americans. Stein describes the difference between poetry and prose as being vocabulary—“[Poetry] is a vocabulary entirely based on the noun as prose is essentially and determinately and vigorously not based on the noun” (136). With some notable exceptions, much Stein criticism in recent years focuses on the poetry and later works, such as Jennifer Ashton’s “Rose is a Rose: Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy” and Lisa Siraganian’s “Out of Air: Theorizing the Art Object in Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis,” both of which challenge claims of lineage between the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement and Stein. As Laura Doyle’s 2000 article, “The Flat the Round, and Gertrude Stein: Race and the Shape of Modern(ist) History” demonstrates, however, there is a great deal yet to be gained from working to track the functioning of a 925-page novel which attempts to be determinate and vigorous and not based on the noun.

Stein’s novel utilizes unconventional, ambiguously referential language and the active, lively voice of an equally indeterminable narrator to engage with and resist the demands of post 18th-century English-language novelistic plot, which drew its form from “the codification of a new plot of origins for English culture, a racialized plot in which sexuality and marriage are the necessary instruments of both progress and reproduction”

¹ As is frequent with Stein, describing The Making of Americans as “her 1925 novel” is as inaccurate as it is accurate, as the novel was composed between 1903 and 1911, and, according to Catriona Menzies-Pike, was substantially unrevised between 1911 and its 1925 publication.

(Doyle 251). Similarly, a reading of The Making of Americans which seeks to foreground the novel's attempt to de-center the heterosexual reproductive family as constitutive unit of social relation has to take account of the way the novel makes use of the possibility of mistakenness within pronouns and the present continuing verb tense in order to invite misreading, as well as the fact that a misreading cannot exist except in active opposition to a determinative reading. By examining The Making of Americans as a novel, driven forward at least initially by the expectation of a plot and the voice of a narrator, it becomes possible to read the ways in which the novel replaces the forward motion provided by plot and identity determined by reproductive sexuality as an active project of enacting an alternative erotic and not simply a failure.

The Making of Americans is thus not a novel without a plot, it is a novel employing a number of strategies to work against being determined by its plot. First, a sort of mechanistic operation within the text itself, in which language and attention to language is used to generate more language, provides a sort of forward momentum through the text which in part replaces the momentum normally provided by suspense and revelation within the plot, Second, the novel employs a strategic application of the elements of conventional plot. In this sense, David Hersland's death can be read not so much as the culmination (or failure) of his family's progress, but as a gesture which provides an outlet for the energies of the conventional plot, allowing the rest of his family to continue their somewhat unconventional progress, escaping narrative notice, and thus, the necessity of a reader's judgment.

I would like to suggest that performing an act of separation in which narrator and characters of The Making of Americans are divided from the figure of the biographical/historical Stein and her family, and there is an attempt to read the various

forward movements of the plot as distinct from the language machine of the novel may open the door to a consideration of the variety of energies—language machine and plot, such as it is—operating within the text itself, and may, at best, allow for a discussion which considers the full, glorious weirdness of The Making of Americans, and the way in which the propagation of language comes to replace the reproductive role of the family.

I. Plot and Placing the Narrator

In beginning to consider The Making of Americans, it seems useful to make what seem to be some fairly obvious observations. Plot itself doesn't seem to be very important to the novel, and what conventional plot there is, defined by Peter Brooks in Reading for the Plot as "the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning" (xi), can be dealt with rather quickly: two families, the Herlands and the Dehnings, both the children of immigrants, raise their children in different parts of the country. The oldest Hersland daughter, Martha, decides to go to college after seeing a man beating a woman with an umbrella, and meets Phillip Redfern, whom she marries. Phillip Redfern gets a job at a different college where he has an affair with Cora Duonor, whose partner, Miss Charles asks Martha to keep her husband under control. Phillip leaves Martha, but she is unable to give up hope that he will eventually return until she finds out that he has died. The second child, Alfred Hersland, marries Julia Dehning after she is able to talk her father out of his resistance to the marriage. Julia Dehning's father lends Alfred some money to get him started in business, but Julia and then her father become convinced that Alfred is untrustworthy, and the marriage fails, but not before Alfred and Julia have two children. Alfred remarries, and Julia nearly remarries. Alfred's friends are happy with his second marriage, and he sees his children from time to time. The third Hersland child, David, comes to live with his brother and Julia. He lives for a time and dies, before any of his siblings. While I've left out a fair amount of detail in terms of people who live around the Herslands and Dehnings, especially while Alfred and Julia's generation are children, it can be said that the previous 300 words describe most of what "happens" in the book.

Except, of course for the narrator. While it would seem to be the narrator's desires and voice that drive the novel forward, any attempt to place the narrator in a particular position (other than as simply narrator) quickly runs into difficulty.² Beyond some tantalizing but ultimately unproductive hints, the desires of the narrator largely cannot be related to the characters and plot of the novel, which would be unremarkable, perhaps, if the narrator didn't seem to be making a dramatic effort to be a presence within the text. In this way, the narrator seems to operate as a vibrant absence, an engine for language rather than an identity, who prefigures Derrida's observation that language operates beyond (and even presupposes) the absence of a speaker. According to Derrida in "Signature Event Context" (reprinted in Limited Inc),

To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my [the author's] future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten. (8)

Furthermore, in responding to J. L. Austin's description of the possibility of "infelicities" (or mistakenness) in ritual or performative speech due to a certain divorce from "the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject in the totality of the speech act" (14), Derrida states that "'Ritual' is not a possible occurrence [*éventualité*], but rather, *as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark" (15). The absence or positional indeterminability of the narrator of The Making of Americans serves to bring forward the way in which the functioning of the linguistic machine cannot be determined by the presence or absence of a particular operator.

² According to Kelley Wagers, "The Making of Americans' first-person persona is most often understood to be Stein or a fictional narrator. This voice indeed details a vexed compositional practice that Stein usually described as her own and the story she tells corresponds to the lives of Stein's family members and friends" (38). Wagers, however, finds a purpose in distinguishing between the biographical/historical Gertrude Stein, and, as I am detailing, so do I.

The *specific* indeterminability of the narrator, however, also serves a function. At the beginning of The Making of Americans, the narrator seems to place herself³ as a member of one of the families she is describing, stating on page 34 that she is telling the reader “about us,” and that she takes an interest in her “own family’s progress.” However, as the novel progresses, the narrator’s exact relation to either of the families is absolutely indeterminable, and it can be argued that there is no possible space for the narrator to occupy within the families who consume her attention. Given the description of the two families, starting with the Hersland and Dehning grandparents, continuing to the parents David and Fanny Hersland and Henry and Jenny Dehning, there are two different positions into which the narrator seems to “want” to be placed. Given the focus on the Hersland and Dehning children, it seems logical to place the narrator as a member of that generation. However, if the narrator is read as describing all of her family (as opposed to her family and in-laws), then it seems logical to place the narrator as one of Alfred and Julia’s children. As I said before, however, there is no concrete evidence to support either of these positionings, and so one who decides to pursue such a task is left with a number of untenable choices: the narrator is one of the two narratively-neglected Dehning siblings, George and Hortense.⁴ Or else the narrator is one of Alfred & Julia’s two surviving children, a girl and a boy, neither of whom is named and about whom the narrator declares herself entirely uninterested.⁵ Or else the narrator is not really declaring

³ I refer to the narrator as “she” as a convention. In fact, the gender of the narrator is never clearly identified within the text.

⁴ Hortense seems an intriguing possibility, except that the narrator repeatedly describes herself as being of the dependent independent kind, and on page 575 Hortense is described as independent dependent.

⁵ “. . . and then Julia Hersland was dead and I am not finding it very interesting knowing what was happening later to the children of Alfred and Julia Hersland” (Stein, Making of Americans, 691).

that she is a member of the Hersland and Dehning families on page 34. Or else the book is internally inconsistent. Perhaps if one wishes to take issue with the assertion that the narrator, by declaring herself interested in her own family's "progress," is placing herself as a member of the Hersland and Dehning families, one should argue that neither family makes much progress at all. In the generation which finds itself the primary concern of three of the novel's four major "chapters," there is exactly one successful marriage—Alfred's second marriage to Minnie Mason—and exactly two children, neither of whom is even named. At the very least, if the novel is concerned with a family's progress, that progress cannot be defined in terms of generational propagation.

But at the same time, neither is The Making of Americans a novel of a family's extinction. There is only one explicitly considered death in the novel,⁶ that of David Hersland, who perishes "at the ending of the beginning of middle living" (902). David Hersland's death is clearly a significant one, no less because the "David Hersland" chapter of the novel presents David as a character who shares with the narrator a project of understanding people based on classifying by types. The most important linkage, however, between the narrator and David Hersland is a functional one and not based on identification. Just as the narrator, ultimately, cannot be determined by a specific position within either the Hersland or Dehning families, David's death doesn't seem to be the result of any specific cause. Both David and the narrator serve to facilitate a productive misreading. Through the creation of indeterminabilities which, though vibrancy and insistence—that is to say through the very force of their repetition—could easily be

⁶ This is not to say that David Hersland is the only character who dies in the novel, but his death is the only one that the novel considers at length.

missed as such, the novel is attempting to escape a particular type of determination altogether.

II. Mistakenness and the Textual Machine

One of the most striking aspects of The Making of Americans, particularly for a book where more than half a million words form a rather textually dense 925 pages,⁷ is the way in which it is a novel of open spaces which the reader is asked to fill. The vacillations of the narrator, as well as the overwhelming use of indefinite pronouns and a continuing present verb tense which resists contextualization in either a particular place or time demand that readers engage in an ongoing process of supplying their own points of reference in order to “draw” meaning from the text. Repetition after repetition serves to undermine the stability of the very words which propagate, or perhaps more accurately, accumulate, within the text. After all, a thing repeated is not the same thing it was before. As per Derrida, the process of “[i]teration alters, something new takes place” (40).

In her “Lectures in America” (reprinted in Look at Me Now and Here I Am), Stein discusses the activity of language and its capacity for error in what the lectures describe as vibrant or lively writing. In “Poetry and Grammar,” the speaker considers punctuation and parts of speech, which are discussed in terms that carry both intellectual and emotional shadings (“interesting,” “exciting,” “I like,” and punctuation is described as something “one can have feelings about”). The speaker expresses dissatisfaction with nouns in particular, and contrasts them to more active parts of speech.

That is the reason that slang exists it is to change the nouns which have been names for so long. I say again. Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are

⁷ Tanya E. Clement states that The Making of Americans contains “517,207 total words and only 5,329 unique words” (362).

lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive. (126)

Nouns, in the speaker's description, are constrained to a referentiality that has lost its ability to convey the object in question, particularly as a result of an inability to include emotion.

As I say, a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known. Everybody knows that by the way they do when they are in love and a writer should always have that intensity of emotion about whatever is the object about which he writes. (124)

Verbs stand in contrast to nouns, but this contrast is characterized as a contrast of activity, not accuracy or conveyance—verbs are able to “be so mistaken” (124). The phrasing of being mistaken is interesting here because being mistaken can operate as a property of the object—the verb can be inaccurate or in error in itself—or “being mistaken” can also be an error of reading or interpretation.⁸ One can be mistaken, but one can also be mistaken *for*. Error, or at least the possibility of error, is part of vibrancy, and a desirable quality. Finally, in “Poetry and Grammar,” there are pronouns, which are better than nouns both in that they “practically cannot have adjectives go with them,” and that “they represent some one but are not its or his name.” In this, pronouns “already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything” (126). It is notable that the “something” in that sentence stands as a “something” on its own and not a referential something. The speaker is not saying that pronouns have a better chance of being something than does the name of that thing.

Pronouns stand in contrast to nouns in their potential for activity and perhaps, in a

⁸ The passage I have quoted seems to discuss primarily the ability of verbs to be in error in themselves, but on page 125 the speaker describes verbs both as “being able to be mistaken *and* to make mistakes” (emphasis mine).

Steinian sense, for being mistaken, rather than for doing the job of a noun—naming and representing a thing—better than a noun does. In the context of The Making of Americans, this mistakenness or mistakability allows the process of repetition and variation which drives the text forward. If The Making of Americans is a textual machine, then the engine of that machine is the activity of error, in which every statement must be restated and modified, every story must be retold, adjusted, and nothing is ever exactly right.

In addition to the activity of error, pleasure in language provides its own sort of forward movement through the text. In her 1991 book, Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis, Lisa Ruddick describes the language of The Making of Americans as “articulating its own erotics” (74), which is to say that in large part the pleasures of the text come from the operating of the book as a text of pleasure, where sound, telling, and repetitions occur, at least in part, for their own sake, as elements pleasurable to the narrator and (at least potentially) to the reader. Ruddick’s psychoanalytic reading allows her to provide a compelling account of the erotics of the language of The Making of Americans in terms of “the rhythms of an anal style—anal rather than [genitally] sexual in some other way because of Stein’s consciousness of the mass of material she is processing in each paragraph” (78). The pleasure of the narrator operates not just on the level of “[i]ncantory repetition,” which according to Ruddick inherently invokes Roland Barthes’ descriptions of *jouissance*, but in the way that delay, accumulation, and then the sharing of information invokes the pleasures of retention, urgency, and release of the feces. While Ruddick links anal-repetitive prose to Stein’s rejection of paternal authority—which is linked to genital sexual pleasure and the primacy of the phallus—for

the purposes of this essay, I'm more interested in the description of anal-repetitive prose as an alternate sort of text-generating "machine":

[Anal-repetitive prose] forces all things to pass through something like an authorial body. The teller refuses to use words as transparent signifiers conveying her thoughts; instead she turns words into objects, which she churns and rechurns, audibly processing her sentences so they bear her particular stamp. She does not leave anything alone; any new datum she introduces (a word or a thought) must be rhythmically played with until it is assimilated to the sounds and vocabulary of previous paragraphs. The repetitive style becomes what the psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, in another context, calls "an enormous grinding machine. (82)

In a novel trying to consider the possibility of a family's progress in terms other than those of generational propagation, the possibility of an anal rather than a genital erotic at play within the language itself allows for discussion of the operation of the textual engine in terms other than (or at least in addition to) those of production. If the reproductive role of the family is to be supplanted, it cannot simply be reproduced in a different form.

Similarly, while Catriona Menzies-Pike's 2007 essay "Defamiliarizing 'The Family': Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans (1925)" grounds a reading of The Making of Americans as a textual machine in the lecture "The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans," in which Stein "represents herself as a kind of text-generating engine" (139), Ruddick argues that the voice of the narrator of The Making of Americans is not unambiguously Stein's own voice. According to Ruddick, in contrast to the "repetitive, almost drugged" circular style of the narrator, in which "[r]ather than execute her characterological scheme, she caresses it, suffusing herself with the pleasant feeling of being about to begin" (72),

[Stein's] notebooks, as it happens, have none of this quality of self-hypnosis; outside the novel, Stein's thoughts are

perfectly linear, and her attempt to classify people, while ambitious, is not grandiose. (72)

The clear implication of this disjunction is that the writing characteristic of The Making of Americans is a stylistic choice, not an expression of a psychological pathology. Once again, The Making of Americans is not reproductive: Stein is not attempting to reproduce herself. According to Menzies-Pike, the text-generating engine within The Making of Americans is fueled not by a forward-moving referential description of a series of events in time “outside” the text, but by the internal tension (energy) generated by a constant opposition between beginning and ending suspended within the continuing present tense of the text: “The grammatical tension between beginning and ending legislates a constant temporal immediacy which reasserts itself on each new opening of the book” (140). Instead of reproducing an external temporality—describing a series of events which occurred in a particular order and share a variety of causal interrelations—the novel instead “engenders” its own continuity “which eventually coheres the narrative” (140).

These descriptions of The Making of Americans as a textual machine can be usefully compared to Peter Brooks’ discussion of narrative desire as a machine which drives forward plot. In Reading for the Plot, Brooks states that “[w]e can . . . conceive of the reading of plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text” (37). Focusing on the 19th century novel, Brooks notes that erotic desire is not only a foundational subject of plot—after all, weddings, the social endorsement of sexual coupling, is the common goal of the romantic or comic plot—but that ambition, a second foundational subject of plot, is also clearly desire set in motion. These desires, in 18th and 19th century literature, were largely conceived of as mechanistic processes:

the eighteenth century’s preoccupation with the machine, as a system for the transmission of forces outside itself, gives

way in the nineteenth century to fascination with the motor, containing its source of movement within itself, built on the three principles of difference (of temperature), reservoir (of fuel), and circulation. (41)

Freud himself, Brooks notes, spoke of the forces of opposition in the unconscious as a primary motivator of activity.

For the purposes of this essay, the most important gesture in Brooks is not his recognition that the characters in stories have desires and that these desires are responsible for motivating the action of the plot, but that the operation of desire in narrative extends to both the telling and the reading of the narrative. Forward motion in narrative depends on both the desire of the reader/teller to reach the end of the narrative, and for the end of that narrative to be continually and interestingly delayed. Narrative meaning can only exist when the events of the present narrative moment (what is happening “now”) can be read “in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot” (94). Without the promise of an ending, the events of the present cannot be given narrative significance, but ending is in a very real sense the death of the narrative, and so the obstacles, reversals, and twists of the narrative act as a pleasurable way for the reader and the teller to extend its “life.”

Brooks’ discussion of repetition becomes especially important at the moment when Stein’s novel seems to leave us bereft of plot. Brooks speaks of repetition in part as a reference to the conventional past tense in narrative fiction, and the way in which if a story must exist in a way that is mindful of its end, then that end must already have taken place. Every story is a repetition, and while the reader of Stein may note Brooks’

insistence that three⁹ is the minimum number of times something must be repeated to form “the minimal intentional structure of action, the minimum plot” (99), Brooks gives us not only an acknowledgement of the pleasure of repeating for its own sake, he also presents a possible use for repeating within the terms of plot even when that repetition moves beyond the pleasurable.

Thus in analytic work (as also in literary texts) there is slim but real evidence of a compulsion to repeat which can override the pleasure principle, and which seems “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides”. . . . Narrative, we have seen, must ever present itself as a repetition of events that have already happened, and within this postulate of a generalized repetition it must make use of specific, perceptible repetitions in order to create plot, that is to show us a significant interconnection of events. An event gains meaning by its repetition, which is both the recall of an earlier moment and a variation of it: the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement. . . . Repetition through this ambiguity appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation that binds different moments together as a middle that might move forward or back. The inescapable middle is suggestive of the demonic: repetition and return are perverse and difficult, interrupting simple movement forward. (99-100)

Anyone who has ever read Stein will recognize the feeling of the demonic and inescapable middle. What Brooks allows us to recognize, however, is what may be termed the aspirational function of repetition, especially within a book like The Making of Americans, which, at least for the first two-thirds, is unwilling to dispense altogether with the semblance of plot. While Lisa Ruddick presents a thorough reading of the ways

⁹ I find myself in constant internal argument (as implied by the title of John Malcom Brinn’s book on Stein, The Third Rose) that Stein’s genius lay in the third iteration. According to The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, the epigram is actually “a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.” That is to say that it is indeed the third iteration in which Stein steps beyond what would have been a simple tautology, but to stop reading at the third rose is to fail to engage with the entirety of the text.

in which repetition is used for pleasure, examining repetition as a means to “suspend temporal process” and to “bind” disparate elements gives us additional ways to interact with the narrator’s eternal digressions.

If, as Brooks notes, [heterosexual] erotic desire is a key component structuring the forward movement of the novel, if it is, indeed, the motor that drives the novel forward, then any novel seeking to center itself on the possibility of relationships other than the heterosexual family as a reproductive unit would need to find an alternative source of narrative motion. As Ruddick and Menzies-Pike observe, in The Making of Americans, language itself becomes the motor which drives the narrator (and the reader) through the text, in part by giving voice to an alternate anal rather than genital erotic, and in part through a compulsion to repetition and variation which itself works to “override the [genital, reproductive] pleasure principle.” In this sense, to tune Menzies-Pike’s reading, what may be evidenced Stein’s stated inability to edit The Making of Americans after its composition is not the [aesthetic?] “wholeness” of the finished text, but the operation of the engine of language in the continuous composition of the text. If part of the making of The Making of Americans was the use of language as a textual engine, and if the continuous present and continuous examination of variation within the text can be read as resulting in a process which records its own composition and, in effect, edits itself, then the editing process can only be viewed as an act of re-composition. That is to say, one would have to re-start the textual engine and generate new text, rather than picking and choosing discrete points of intervention. Of course, this metaphor works only insofar as the language itself is the subject of the text. Language to serve a plot can be altered to

better serve the plot,¹⁰ but language which is meant to function as a textual engine, and more importantly, as the record of the functioning of that engine, cannot be altered without restarting the engine.

The capacity for error, however, is every bit as important as the forward motion provided by language, because it provides the rationale for the novel's blurring of the erotics of desire in plot and language. By shifting focus in part from a naturalistic social realism to the functioning of language, The Making of Americans allows for a certain amount of distraction from what goes on within the plot itself. By replacing the erotics of heterosexual normativity with erotics of language and repetition rather than the representation in plot of alternate social erotics, The Making of Americans allows a variety of social relations to exist without passing judgment on them. This can be contrasted, for example, to Kate Chopin's The Awakening, in which social realism dictates that the novel represent its protagonist's inability to find a place in the social order when she leaves her marriage, thus, in effect, making the novel punish its protagonist for deviation from social norms. In The Making of Americans, by contrast, there's no evidence that Miss Duonor or Miss Charles end up separated or are socially punished for their homosexual relationship (even though they face the same possibility of infidelity that heterosexual couples face), and Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning are able to be described as more socially active (and perhaps happier) after the end of their marriage than they were during the marriage.

¹⁰ If a train must arrive at 5:00, it may arrive promptly, at the last possible second, or it may simply arrive, depending on whether suspense is required or it would instead be preferable to not distract for other events. In any case, altering the manner of the arrival does not alter the fact of the arrival necessary to the [hypothetical] plot.

As an unusual piece of evidence, I'd like to consider of Clive Bush's 1978 essay, "Toward the Outside: The Quest for Discontinuity in Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress" which serves perhaps as a good example of the success of the misreadability I've been describing. Bush characterizes The Making of Americans as "a kind of romantic satire" in which "[l]ike her aging contemporary, Henry Adams, and her young contemporary, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein felt bound both to examine the historical legacies of American life and to give an account of the artist to free himself [sic] from the immediate realities of his childhood and adolescence" (28). While placing The Making of Americans into the context of the great (read: long) modernist novels can be sourced to Stein herself, who in "Portraits and Repetition" makes the claim that her novel deserves to be considered on the same terms as Joyce's Ulysses and Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu, it seems to be a mistake to extend similarity of accomplishment to an argument for similarity of form. While Joyce and Proust each use the device of tracking a young man, who either narrates the novel in the first person (Proust) or acts as the point-of-view character for a limited omniscient narrator (Joyce), it is impossible to give Stein's narrator a specific position within the events of her novel's plot.

A better description of the source of Bush's characterization of The Making of Americans as "romantic satire" may be found in the combination of the gesture to link the novel's narrator to the biographical/historical person of Gertrude Stein, and the manner in which Bush seems to wish to describe the figure of the artist. While I would like to suggest that Bush's focus on Americanness within the text is one of the markers of misreading in which title of the novel and the initial declaration of the intentions of the narrator are taken a bit more seriously than may be merited—and this is a point which

may be reasonably contended¹¹—I will focus instead on Bush’s repeated use of the word “freedom” to describe the intentions of the narrator and the functioning of the text. While it would seem odd to use “freedom” to describe a central concern of The Making of Americans, since the word is largely absent in the text, by making a claim that “Gertrude Stein’s instinct was to talk about freedom” (46), Bush is able to construct Stein’s narrator (and thus Stein herself) as participating in a romantic idealization of the artist. In what appears to be a reference to the narrator’s “I am writing for myself and strangers” passage, Bush remarks that “[l]oneliness, and here Gertrude Stein takes up the great romantic tradition, is the price of unspeakable visions” (45), and later, in response to David Hersland’s withdrawal from life into a form of catatonic paralysis, Bush states that “[t]he real freedom in the novel is reserved for that inner authorial voice. It has freed itself in the exposure of death as the essence of American family living” (53). Thus, while the (arguably romantic) figure of David Hersland extinguishes itself, the voice of the narrator, and thus Stein herself, rises on a pedestal of artistic accomplishment, though which she has set herself free. Rather than tracing the operations of language in the novel (Bush doesn’t turn his attention to the text itself until the twelfth page of his twenty-seven page essay), difficulty, idiosyncrasy, and repetitions are lumped together as the freedom of the authorial voice, which may, so long as the author is an artist, do whatever it pleases. The intention seems to be effusive in praising Stein, but the effect, at least within the immediate critical context of Bush’s essay, is to neutralize the difficulty and

¹¹ While American identity is clearly important to the narrator and undoubtedly at play in the description of the immigrant generations of the Herslands and the Dehnings in the opening chapter of the novel, the use of the word “american” (always uncapitalized) largely drops out of the book by the Martha Hersland chapter, making a significant return only in the Alfred & Julia Dehning chapter, as a largely content-free descriptor in the Dehning family’s sense of its own “right rich american living.” Unlike the earlier chapter in which “american” living can be set implicitly against the previous (largely unspecified) European living, the implicit opposing term in the later chapter is the Dehning family’s perception of Alfred Hersland’s living as wrong, dishonest, and thus in their perception un-American.

idiosyncrasy of the novel. Still, even in this, the language is successful. Mistakability drives the engine; it has been mistaken. A reader without use for an alternative social construction has been able without too much trouble to place the novel within a fairly conventional plot in which the author/narrator and a protagonist sentimentally identified with the author/narrator participate in a [masculine] narrative of artistic accomplishment, which results in the freedom of the author/narrator to be unconventional.

III. Pronouns, Error, and the Death of David Hersland

Even for the mistakenness I attribute to his reading,¹² Bush's article is noteworthy for his consideration of the younger David Hersland's death in the penultimate chapter of the novel. Even Lisa Ruddick and Laura Doyle's outstanding work on The Making of Americans tend to focus on the early chapters, in which individual characters and their social relations are more explicitly delineated. As The Making of Americans progresses, there is a movement away from naming things and even people that finds a turning point in the David Hersland chapter. While there are, arguably, a number of characters present in the David Hersland chapter, the list of proper names present in the text has contracted from the early chapters, which include Herslands and Hissens and Dehnings and Maxworthings and Linkers and Redferns and Dounors and Charleses, to include only David Hersland and his immediate family—father, mother, Alfred, Alfred's wife, Julia, and Julia's brother George Dehning. Arguably, the only presences in much of the chapter are David Hersland and the narrator. Still, for all the ways in which the David Hersland chapter is different, it may, actually have a certain consistency with the "plot" of the previous chapters. The driving force is still the textual engine, although in the David Hersland chapter, the mistakeability that has fueled the engine expands to include identity itself.

¹² And it's worth noting that within the context of this essay that "mistakenness" is not an unambiguous criticism.

It is difficult to trace the progress of Stein's chapters, as to attempt to do so is to risk falling into Stein's language.¹³ Still, in order to examine the tension between language and plot, let us do a little tracing of the David Hersland chapter. The chapter opens with an extended dirge on "angry feeling," and it is useful to note the difference between the "angry feeling" repetitions and the meditations on various topics earlier in the novel. In earlier meditations, where the narrator allows herself to be diverted from the plot by a topic or topics and uses those topics to circle and repeat, the narrator uses repetition to introduce variation. Something will be said and then it will be said slightly differently and then something else will be said and the thing that was said before will be said again in a way that has something to do with the second thing and then the second thing might be said again. This is often followed by some sort of loose summation or statement that can be read as the narrator's intention of what was to have been accomplished. (This often takes much longer than the summation I have just given.) The effect of such meditations seems to be an exploration of the feeling of the object, condition, or experience under examination, and repetitions are (often but not always) of extended statements or passages. In the "angry feeling" passages, which consume eleven pages between 755 and 766, another six pages between 772 and 778, and more lightly touches the pages in-between, seems to focus more on specific repetition of the words "angry feeling." Pages 755-757 in particular focus on the fact that angry feeling is something that many people have, including the various Herslands, and that people feel differently about having angry feeling at various times. Lisa Ruddick reads anger in The Making of Americans as reflecting Stein's process of first trying to mitigate and then

¹³ As in Borges, in attempting to map the territory, one faces the challenge of doing so without the map becoming as large as the territory.

embracing and finding artistic energy in her anger at her father and paternalistic inherited values. At the same time, however, there is significant concern in the angry feeling chapters with normalizing angry feeling. Angry feeling is not something that either David Hersland or the narrator experiences alone, but is something experienced by the other members of the Hersland family as well as a more generalized “some others.” The very insistence upon the phrase “angry feeling” can either be read as a dwelling within, inhabiting and strengthening angry feeling, or as an emptying out of angry feeling, neutralizing and abstracting it. The repetition of “angry feeling” itself seems implicitly to emphasize the gulf between the experience of angry feeling—in which one cannot help but continue to speak and be in anger—and the experience of reading about angry feeling, especially when repetition divides, modifies, and compartmentalizes the anger being described, which is something that one has, and then something that one knows, and then something that someone else has and knows.

The “angry feeling” passages end on page 778, with an early moment of ambiguity between the narrator and David Hersland in a passage marked by an unanchored third-person singular pronoun. After concluding a paragraph that “David Hersland was such a one,” the narrator opens a paragraph, “If he feels it and he knows it and he tells it and he thinks it and he says it, clearly tells it why then perhaps it is something and perhaps it is not anything” (778). This sentence is an echo of the narrator’s description of herself at the beginning of the Martha Hersland chapter in which “There are many that I know and they know it. They are all of them repeating and I hear it. I love it and I tell it” (291). This echo, however, is not specifically tied to either David Hersland or the narrator. The paragraph continues with the indefinite pronoun “some” as the subject of its remaining ten sentences. Soon after, on page 782, the narrator steps out of

the present continuing tense for a passage of uncertainty: “I mean, I mean and that’s not what I mean. . . I mean I am not certain of that thing. . . I mean, I mean, I know what I mean.”¹⁴ The abatement of the anger the narrator was inhabiting seems to lead to confusion and ambiguity. The breakdown in the communicability of the identity of the narrator continues in part through the destabilization of the personal pronoun—it is no longer certain at all times that an unquoted “I” is meant to refer to the narrator, and there is an apparent and increasing association of the third-person indefinite pronoun “some,” or the slightly more definite “some one” with the narrator.¹⁵ Even nouns, when present, are troubled. The word “thing” appears in abundance, and operates as a noun, as part of an indefinite noun construction (“the thing that one is needing to be doing”), and, increasingly, both as part of indefinite noun constructions, and as a single word replacing an indefinite noun construction, as a pronoun. This movement towards pronounization finds its climax in the final “History of a Family’s Progress” chapter, in which there are no proper names, and in which nouns are even in remarkably short supply. It is also difficult, by this point to not read the way in which nouns themselves act as pronouns, which, as Stein describes, tend to replace and not make present the object which they name.

The attempt to make definitive statements about any discrete segment of Stein’s novel runs into a problem in that each of Stein’s chapters, while appearing to be wildly divergent in style, voice, and execution, contains many of the elements of all the other

¹⁴ The full paragraph I have abridged is a single run-on sentence of one hundred and four words.

¹⁵ Combined with a the possibly self-referential “you” cited earlier, this may mean that the narrator occupies, at some point in the text, nearly all of the available pronoun forms, with the notable exception of the third-person singular, which, in English, is the one gendered pronoun form.

chapters of The Making of Americans. While Ruddick's argument focuses on Stein's father, Daniel Stein, as a model for David Hersland, and thus a partial source for the narrator's "angry feeling," the passage on which Ruddick's argument hinges is a description of an unidentified father and daughter in the earlier Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning chapter, which echoes Henry Dehning's disapproval of his daughter's plans to marry into the Hersland family back in the initial untitled chapters. The "angry feeling" passages are not entirely structurally dissimilar from the earlier meditations, they just repeat the words "angry feeling" more often. The collapse of the narrator in the David Hersland chapter, marked by an increasing number of unanchored second and third-person pronouns, as well as first-person singular pronouns found in passages that do not fall cleanly into previous patterns of narration and digression echoes the full variety of first, second, and third-person pronouns found in the very first pages of the novel. If one wishes to argue that Stein kills her plot through the extinction of the Hersland and Dehning families (thus abandoning the privileged treatment of heterosexual reproductivity), then it seems as likely to place that gesture within the end of Alfred and Julia Hersland's marriage and the narrator's declaration of her lack of interest in the fates of their children instead of in David Hersland's death.

And still, David Hersland is different, somehow, and his chapter is different. Even as late as the Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning chapter, statements that are initially made vaguely, such as that Alfred remarries and that Julia might have remarried but never happened to do so, are eventually made concrete through the identification of Alfred's second wife (Minnie Mason) and the man that Julia almost marries (William Beckling), as well as the names of the large number of people that Alfred and Julia interact with after the end of their marriage. While it is hinted earlier in the novel that

David Hersland is of the dependent independent kind,¹⁶ the David Hersland chapter abandons the dependent independent/independent dependant categories, and doesn't seem to concern itself with either attacking or resisting.

There is a certain stylistic progression in The Making of Americans, but it is important to note that variations between the novel's chapters are produced largely through the omission of certain elements of earlier chapters (such as named characters), and a shift in emphasis to elements which may seem new, but are largely already present. For example, while the destabilization of the identity of the narrator in the David Hersland chapter is cited as one of its distinguishing features, it must be admitted that the tools used to do so are present in early sections of the novel. The narrator describes herself as "one" on page 181, and as "you" on page 183. Thus, even though the first chapters largely operate in terms of the presence of a narrative voice marked by the word "I," there is already a certain potential non-definition extant in the text, and its very unremarkability in the early chapters makes a subtle but strong argument that the potential for such non-definition must exist in (many, most, or all) other texts as well.

The dissolution of the narrator does not solely rely on ambiguous or free-floating pronouns. The narrator seems to interject what may be a personal anecdote into a meditation on advice (768). She appears to address and interrogate a specific second person: "I certainly cannot in any way know it is a trouble to you to do this thing when you asked me whether you should or should not do this thing and then did what I said you should do about doing this thing" (772). This can be compared, for example, to a more rhetorical or self-referential "you" on 183: "When you come to feel the whole of anyone

¹⁶ His [David Hersland Sr.'s] feeling was very different with his two sons who each in their way was annoying to him but Martha was annoying to him being as she was of the same kind of being [independent dependent] as the being that was in him.

from the beginning to the ending. . .” The narrator even appears to describe a personal relationship, which is then directly linked in kind to the being of David Hersland: “She says go, go, and I go, she says come, come, and I come. . . David Hersland was almost wanting to be needing to be such a one, one coming and one going” (853). In troubling the identity and presence of the narrator, The Making of Americans is both making a gesture away from the 19th century novelistic trope of a centered narrator who “tells” the novel (“Reader, I married him”), and opening the possibility of invigorating the text with the vibrancy of the narrator. By making the narrator mistakeable, the narrator becomes part of the textual engine itself instead of its ostensible driver, a verb as much as a noun. Insofar as the narrator remains a possibility within the text—as long as there are moments where the narrator seems to appear, or aspects of the narrator’s speech or desires appear within the text or other characters—then the reader’s desire for the presence of the narrator can drive forward movement (reading) within the text. The dissolution of a clearly discernible identity for the narrator creates the possibility of mistaking the narrator for the text (and vice-versa), and foregrounds the way in which the traits and functions of the narrator have always (in all novels) been operations of the text.

The chapters focusing on Martha and Alfred Hersland focus (leaving aside the narrator’s meditations for the moment) on the beginning and ending of the siblings’ marriages. David Hersland, it is stated quite clearly, never marries, but he is one, it is stated who “was wanting to be needing to be feeling that any woman was in some ways a really beautiful one” (791), and, later

David Hersland was one certainly in a way needing to be certain that every woman was in a way a beautiful thing. Certainly not any woman was in a way a beautiful thing to him. He was completely needing that every woman is a beautiful thing. (837)

This is followed by a description of some one who “sometimes ran after him and certainly asked him then how he was and was one not having any other thing just then to say to him” (838). Hersland realizes that this running is linked to affection, and the one who does this running is apparently doing it quite often. The novel is actually interested in David’s sexuality, perhaps even more than David is himself. David, after all, is one “wanting to be needing to be feeling” that a woman could be beautiful, but “[c]ertainly not any woman was in a way a beautiful thing to him.” David, in addition, is not universally indifferent.

He was loving one then and he was in a way telling this thing, telling it to her and others who were knowing it then and in a way it was not interesting to her and he was not really telling it to her then and certainly any one could be certain that he was telling then something about that thing about loving the one he was loving then and she could be certain of this thing that he was telling that thing, telling that he was loving. (871)

The paragraph traces, David’s interest in telling his loving, and her eventual interest, and “their” interest (each of the two is described as being interested individually, and then the are described as being interested as a collective unit, all achieved through a shift from singular pronouns to a plural pronoun). The subject of David Hersland’s affections is not identified, although we are told that the people around them are not happy about David’s affections.

David is also clearly capably of intimacy, most specifically with the Dehning family.

David Hersland was convincing then Julia Hersland and he was coming to be completely doing this thing and she was being living then almost completely being living then being one understanding this thing understanding having David Hersland being completely convincing. He was one who could be completely convincing and could be completely explaining this thing explaining that he was one who could

be completely convincing and he could be completely explaining this thing explaining that he was completely convincing , explaining that Julia Hersland was completely needing this thing, explaining this clearly, completely clearly to Julia Hersland then. He was completely then completely understanding needing to be completely convincing to Julia Hersland then. He and she were coming to be completely understanding this thing. He went on with the thing, he went on being completely convincing to her and it was a thing that they were almost pleasantly doing and he was one completely clearly understanding being completely convincing. (887)

Within The Making of Americans, with a narrator who writes for herself and strangers, this is a passage of striking intimacy. There is convincing and understanding and this understanding is a thing that “he and she” are coming to do. There is sharing needing. There is an all-consuming (“completely”) doing. This sharing is described as an almost pleasant thing. In a novel largely devoid of such intimacy, it is tempting to read these passages as evidence of an affair.

Of course, there is nothing in these passages indicating that the affair is sexual. Explicit sexuality is nearly absent from The Making of Americans, where even Miss Charles’ and Miss Duonor’s reasonably open lesbian relationship would be fairly easy to misread or ignore. It also could not be stated with certainty that should an affair be taking place that Julia Hersland is cheating on her husband. It is established in the Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning chapter that David Hersland continues to know the Dehning family after the end of Alfred and Julia’s marriage. In fact, given that Phillip Redfern’s infidelity is treated openly in the Martha Hersland chapter, there seems to be little reason for the novel to treat a possible affair in ambiguous terms. It seems more likely that the

relationship itself is ambiguous,¹⁷ and is more closely related to rather than more distinct from David's relationships with the rest of the Dehning family.

In fact, much of the terminology used in conjunction with mentions of Julia Dehning is used to discuss other members of the Dehning family. David Hersland engages upon a project of understanding with George and Henry Dehning with varying degrees of success (he does better with George than with Mr. Dehning). A great deal of the support for a reading of an affair between David and Julia Hersland comes from the sexual undertones of the verb "to know,"¹⁸ but again, it cannot be denied that the word "knowing" is used rather wantonly in the David Hersland chapter.¹⁹ Regardless of the specific implications for David Hersland's sexuality, which is ultimately indeterminate, in his knowing, David maintains a wide circle of intimacy—coming to know "almost anyone who knew Julia Hersland. . . very many who were knowing Alfred Hersland. . . every one whom George Dehning was knowing" (884).

¹⁷ David Hersland's sexuality is itself ambiguous. The statement that "not any woman was in a way a beautiful thing to [David Hersland]" is made far more directly than the description of his "needing that every woman is a beautiful thing." It is entirely possible to read the specific passage in question as a rather compelling description of being closeted.

¹⁸ At the risk of a digression, I think that it may be possible to make an argument for The Making of Americans having a largely unacknowledged stylistic debt to the Hebrew Bible. Among my sources, only Clive Bush talks about Stein "graft[ing] Judaic legend onto Greek," but he is correct that there are understated nods such as beginning her story of a family and a family's origins in an orchard, and a reference to the Joseph of Genesis in the "brother singulars passage." In addition, imagery such as "eyes large with needing weeping" and the use of variation in repetition find a model in the Psalms and other ancient Hebrew poetry.

¹⁹ The Making of Americans, page 884:

He had been knowing some and all of them had been knowing him. He had been knowing some who were all of them knowing each other then. He was knowing some who were not knowing any one who was knowing him. He was knowing some who were telling some other ones about knowing him. He was knowing some who were telling him about the thing, about knowing him.

Ruddick argues that Stein has completed “the emotional effort of the novel” through her earlier disentangling from her father’s sexual possessiveness through a depiction in incestuous terms of a father’s interference with his daughter’s plans to marry (119). The last David Hersland chapter, according to Ruddick, even for its provocative “angry feeling” passages, exists as a way for Stein to kill her plot (127). I think that this is largely correct, although perhaps a different manner of killing a different manner of plot. In the previous Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning chapter, Stein has already “killed” the novel’s family. The marriage joining the Herslands and the Dehnings has ended, concluding the multigenerational progress that would otherwise seem to constitute the novel’s plot, except that the connection continues through David Hersland’s relationships with Julia and George Dehning. The movement from Martha Hersland to Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning to David Hersland, read in terms of their intimate relationships presents an additional narrative to consider in The Making of Americans, and makes an argument that too much can be made of David Hersland’s death as the endpoint of the novel’s “plot.” After all, David Hersland is far from the only character to die in the novel, although his death is dealt with at the greatest length, and seems to have the most impact on the narrator. Reading the “progress” of the Hersland family in conventional terms seems to be the story of a family’s extinction, but there is a kind of progress in the various stories being told.

In “An Epic of Subjectivation: The Making of Americans,” Barrett Watten argues that The Making of Americans seeks to overcome the Oedipal model of social subjectivity through “creating a network of familial and social relations that provide a complicated matrix, rather than a simple lineage, for ancestry” (98). Watten traces this primarily through the disappearance of Fanny Hersland from her children’s awareness to

be replaced by a series of governesses, and the “social matrix” operates largely in terms determined by the loss of the mother. Extending consideration from David Hersland Sr. and Fanny Hersland to include the adult experiences of the Hersland children allows a certain sort of progress to be described. Martha Hersland has little social interaction, and when her marriage fails, she retreats to her parents, believing until her husband’s death that he will come back to her. Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning’s marriage fails, but their social interactions bloom after the end of the marriage. During their marriage, we are told of only the two of them and their families, but afterward the chapter gains a proliferation of new characters. Neither Alfred nor Julia seems particularly concerned with their children, but they each have new intimate relationships, and remarry or nearly remarry. Perhaps most importantly, their marriage introduces David Hersland to the Dehning family, where David enters a new social environment. David Hersland never marries, but through his knowing he has intimacy with a wide circle of people. David’s ambiguous sexuality is not described as being liberating (not even to the point of being able to be unambiguously acknowledged), but he can be read as the culmination of a progression from Martha Hersland’s obsessive focus on a relationship with one individual, to Alfred & Julia Herland’s broad set of relationships after the failure of their marriage, to David’s indifference to marriage and children, and his knowing of “everyone.” If there is a plot which finds its end in David Hersland, it is a movement enacted by the novel away from the centering of the biological/heterosexual family as a constitutive unit.

In fact, of course, David’s death isn’t the end of the novel. If David is well and truly dead at the end of the chapter bearing his name, then there’s still an additional 30-page chapter following his death which is no more about David than it is about any other

specific individual. At the same time, however, David Hersland's death allows for the release of the energies of plot. It is the event that allows the book to end. As Laura Doyle describes in discussing Stein's Three Lives, there is an "ethnicized, reproductive logic" at play in the plot of the English-language novel, and the narrator of Three Lives "follows this racialized and heterosexual narrative logic until it kills off all of her deviant female protagonists" (265). The Making of Americans, however, finds a different track. Through the complexity, ambiguity, and digression of the rest of the novel, as well as the rather vague causes of David's own death,²⁰ the event is divorced from the determinative impact described by Peter Brooks—that is to say, David's death is not the event which gives the novel *meaning*. David does not die from social isolation, or because he does not fit in with society. David's death does not pass judgment on the nature of his social relationships, or those of his siblings. The family may be insufficient as a sole source of social relationships, but everyone except Martha, finds alternatives.

It's also worth noting that David's death as a culmination within the novel is a bit of authorial/structural sleight of hand. Chronological placement within The Making of Americans is always problematic, but David's death is notable for its untimeliness, in contrast to the other deaths described in the novel. In this sense, each of the other chapters of the book actually continue on after David's death. David's death functions as a certain version of the end of the plot, and makes sense in terms of the plots that (intelligent, well-read) readers like Clive Bush expect to read, where a young romantic hero meets an untimely and tragic death. But David Hersland's death does not pay for the social and moral failures of his imperfect family, any more than it entails the end of his

²⁰ David stops eating? Maybe? He goes from one "eating something" to one "almost not eating anything" (864). Even if one reads this "not eating" as being the cause of David's death, we're never told why his eating becomes limited—whether this is a choice, a result of illness, etc.

family line. David's death meets the demands of the erotics of a plot working to overcome the pleasure principle. Aided by an extended troubling of noun/pronoun construction, which in part has blurred the boundaries between David's emotional state and that of the narrator, it allows the reader to make the mistake of reading David's death as the ending which determines the plot.

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