‘A text in process’: The Progressive Aspect in Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans

Alyson Brickey
University of Toronto
alyson.brickey@mail.utoronto.ca

Introduction: The Making of Americans

Here again it was all so natural to me and more and more complicatedly a continuous present. A continuous present is a continuous present. I made almost a thousand pages of a continuous present. (Stein 1990, 518)

Although she did not see it published until 1925, Gertrude Stein began work on her most experimental text in 1903. At 925 pages, The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress is arguably Stein’s most ambitious work, and its considerable length is matched only by its historical scope. It follows the lives of three generations of one American family, The Herslands, and though there are no traditional chapters as such, the text is organized into five long sections. There is considerable overlap between these sections, and they are ordered as follows: ‘The Making of Americans’, ‘Martha Hersland’, ‘Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning’, ‘David Hersland’, and ‘History of a Family’s Progress’. Despite this fairly straightforward template, the text’s form is marked by a confusing circularity, a plot that is difficult to trace, and what can often be for many readers a frustrating recurrence of repetitious phrases. This is not surprising, given that Stein was one of literary modernism’s most avant-garde members.

Although it remains largely overlooked by critics and literary theorists, Stein’s ‘anti-novel’ and self-proclaimed ‘masterpiece’ remains one of the most influential and experimental works of art to come out of the early twentieth-century. Described as ‘unreadable’ by many, the text’s difficulty challenges even the most faithful lover of experimental literary technique, and because of this it has enjoyed a less than stellar reputation since its publication. As Scott Pound notes, ‘It’s probably safe to say that most English professors, perhaps even the majority of American literature professors, have not read The Making of Americans’ (Pound 2007, 25). Despite Stein’s use of a relatively simple vocabulary and set of familiar conceptual topics (generational bonds, coming of age, marriage, death), her unique rhythms, sparse use of punctuation, and constant repetition facilitate the creation of what many readers find to be an inhospitable environment. Often referred to as ‘Steinese’, Stein’s peculiar brand of linguistic play makes this text’s grammatical features particularly interesting for the way in which its form interacts with (and often undermines) its content.
In a gesture toward the Greek forefathers of modern thought, Stein opens the book with a quote from Aristotle's *Nicomachian Ethics*: ‘Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. “Stop!” cried the groaning old man at last, “Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree”’ (qtd in Stein 1995, 3). This epigraph underscores Stein’s interest in issues of inheritance and tradition and, as this paper argues, she both invokes and subverts these notions throughout the text. Through her consistent use of the progressive aspect (to be + an -ing verb form, such as ‘I am reading’), Stein both linguistically and thematically eschews linearity in favour of a more dynamic conception of time and history inflected by a sense of ongoingness and simultaneity. Stein’s sensitivity to the rhetorical implications of syntax can be seen even in the title itself, and the word ‘making,’ as Steven Meyer points out,

may consequently be understood in two different but noncontradictory senses, depending on whether one reads it as containing an objective or subjective genitive: as the process whereby Americans are made (*the making of what? The making of Americans*) or the process whereby Americans make anything (*The what of Americans? The making of Americans*). (Meyer 1995, xvi)

I argue that Stein’s consistent use of the progressive aspect works to critique the notion of history as progress, conventionally represented through the use of teleological timelines. Stein’s text complicates the process of tracing history through inherited norms by disrupting the reader’s ability to link moments in a sequential causal order, and she accomplishes this at the level of syntax.

The Progressive Aspect: Some History

Though the progressive (or ‘continuous’ aspect as linguists sometimes call it), has been a feature of the English language for many hundreds of years, its grammaticalization did not occur until the late eighteenth century. Considering ‘The Syntax of Modernism’, Sylvia Adamson discusses how

by 1776 the contrast between progressive and simple verb forms had been grammaticalised [...] and grammarians of the period recognise a distinction in the present tense between the simple present (e.g. *he walks*) as the appropriate form of ‘gnomologic’ propositions or habitual events, and the progressive present (e.g. *he is walking*) as the form oriented to the ‘real now’ of current experience or current speech. (Adamson 1998, 666)

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘gnomologic’ refers to a type of sweeping generalization, ‘a general maxim’ linked to the Greek noun ‘gnome’, signifying ‘a short pithy statement of a general truth’. The progressive present, then, allows for a movement away from generalization and toward a sense of specificity and particularity. It is worth noting here the critical tendency to focus on Stein’s term ‘bottom nature’ to refer to a classifiable and universal
set of human types that can be discussed in general terms. Jane L. Walker, for instance, writes that Stein ‘systematized her understanding of character’ resulting in a ‘typology’ — an ‘elaborate system for classifying the “bottom natures” that inform all human behaviour’ — with an end desire to ‘illustrate its universal truth’ (Walker 1984, 49). While I do not wish to discount the language of categorization that does indeed pervade this work, I think that by examining Stein’s writing at the syntactic level we may discover that she herself is complicating the process of categorization Walker identifies.

As the progressive aspect grew in popularity amongst literary writers in the eighteenth century, it became associated with the Romantic interest in ‘immediate personal experience’ (Adamson 1998, 666). As Adamson explains, the movement away from the simple past (he walked) offered writers a new way to shift from ‘a matter of fact to a matter of experience’ (667). While ‘the simple past was recognised as the canonical tense of history [because] it places events within a neutral chronological record’, ‘Romantic poets […] embraced both colloquial diction and immediate personal experience and there was a corresponding leap in the incidence of present progressives’ (667, 666). Here we see syntax being used to better represent the subjective intricacies of human experience. Despite her language of categorization, Stein too remains sensitive to this subjectivity; she is not writing a history of ‘everyone’, but rather, as we shall see below, of ‘every one’.

Examples from the Text

The character David Hersland provides an interesting example for the way in which Stein undermines traditional notions of personal and collective history. Though his section comes late in the text, we encounter him fairly early on, as ‘he begins then at the beginning of the ending of his middle living to repeat more and more the whole of him’ (Stein 1995, 142). Melanie Taylor notes that in this passage ‘Aristotelian conventions […] are adopted only to be set aside or circumvented by paradoxical statements […]. Here, the conventions of traditional narrative […] seem to be simultaneously dismantled by the absurdities of the prose’ (Taylor 2003, 29). When we encounter the ‘David Hersland’ section much later in the text, therefore, his story is a repetition of an already unstable sense of narrative progression, and Stein employs the progressive aspect in order to facilitate an encounter with what Taylor characterizes as ‘a syntax and diction that simultaneously create a sense of frenetic activity and stasis’ (Taylor 2003, 29).

In the following excerpt, we see a preoccupation with both psychological and emotional realities. Here, in the middle of a discussion about individualism and learning from others, we encounter the very subjective verbs ‘think’ and ‘feel’ in the progressive present:

Some are thinking, some are feeling, some are thinking and feeling, some are thinking some one is feeling, some are thinking some one is thinking, some are thinking some one is feeling and thinking, some are feeling some one is thinking, some are feeling some one is thinking and feeling, some are feeling some one is feeling. (Stein 1995, 771-2)

In this particularly dense passage, the progressive present seems to not only complicate any easy delineation between thinking and feeling (they are, we might even say, interchangeable here), but also invests this prose with something like a radical simultaneity of events. This
makes linearity quite impossible; the idea of narrative sequence collapses because all of this thinking and feeling is happening right now, continuously.

Stein’s choice of which verbs to include in the continuous aspect is also telling. In the following passage, taken from the very end of ‘The Making of Americans’ section, it is primarily the verb ‘to live’ that carries the -ing ending after ‘to be’. This suggests that perhaps what Stein is actually after here is not a complete history of everyone who has ever lived, but rather an account of what ‘living’ means, and what it might mean to write life:

Repeating then is in every one, in every one their being and their feeling and their way of realising everything and every one comes out of them in repeating. […] Sometime there will be an ordered history of every one. Slowly every kind of one comes into ordered recognition. More and more then it is wonderful in living the subtle variations coming clear into ordered recognition, coming to make every one a part of some kind of them, some kind of men and women. Repeating then is in every one, every one then comes sometime to be clearer to some one, sometime there will be then an orderly history of every one who ever was or is or will be living. (284)

While we only find two instances in this passage of the continuous aspect, there are many instances of verbal nouns with an -ing ending, such as ‘repeating’, ‘being’, and ‘feeling’. My sense is that these perform aurally like a theme in a piece of music, whereby the continuous action implied by the -ing ending comes to dominate the entire passage. It is in this way that this sense of ongoingness, or continuity inherent in the continuous present, starts to inflect the entire text.

Also notable is the last line, where we have this instance of three progressive aspects being juggled syntactically: ‘every one who ever was [living, past progressive] or is [living, present progressive] or will be living [future progressive]’. These three aspects are placed in a type of rhetorical rotation at the end of the sentence; the reader is, in a way, free to choose which completes the clause through the use of the conjunction ‘or’. This technique both removes the primacy of the past tense characteristic of traditional historical narratives (this ‘ordered history’ and ‘ordered recognition’ she gestures toward) and, through the use of the progressive, imbues all three of these temporal markers with a quality of dynamic play. It would not be accurate to accuse Stein of ‘presentism’ here, which L.N. Oaklander defines as

a currently fashionable [view of the tenses [wherein] only the present exists; the past and future are species of unreality, that is, the past and future tenses are operators (with no ontological significance) on present tense sentences. (Oaklander 2006, 575)

Instead of placing a primacy on the present tense, Stein decides to yoke an unfixed quality of mobility and movement to all three syntactic gestures toward the past, present, and future. They are all, in other words, set in motion.
Some Semantic Implications

This simultaneity results in a reading experience that can at times be overwhelming. We feel as though we are receiving all the information at once, and the ongoingness of the continuous aspect (the fact that it does not signify a stopping point) helps to engender this feeling. In her book *Point of View: A Linguistic Analysis of Literary Style*, Susan Ehrlich discusses the textual enactment of the progressive aspect in relation to this sense of dynamism. She uses the example ‘Fred walked into the room. He sat down on the couch’ to discuss the difference between the simple and progressive aspect (Ehrlich 1990, 88). She writes:

Because simple aspect refers to endpoints, the inception of Fred’s sitting down is referred to in the second sentence[]. Thus, it is interpreted as occurring after the previous sentence’s event. The progressive aspect, on the other hand, does not refer to endpoints and, thus, receives a different interpretation in discourse. (88)

Next Ehrlich changes the aspect to form her second example: ‘Fred walked into the room. The janitor was sitting down on the couch’. Of this second sentence she notes that

the predicate, *was sitting down*, is interpreted as overlapping with the event denoted in the previous sentence. Because its inception is not explicitly referred to by the progressive aspect, it is interpreted as ongoing and, in part, contemporaneous with Fred’s walking into the room. (88)

This gets at the heart of the way in which Stein attempts to build her ‘continuous present’. In reference to my discussion of the ‘feeling and thinking’ passage above, it is both the ‘ongoing’ness of the verbs as well as the fact that they are all temporally situated in the same tense (here the present) that sets them all in play in every part of the passage. Stein creates something like a polyphonic time—meaning is being accrued cumulatively but it seems distinct from the way in which we gather knowledge from more traditional sentences such as ‘Fred walked into the room’. Again, it is as if the narrative construction offers us all of its information at once. The continuous present, in concert with Stein’s other linguistic devices such as run-on sentences, a distinct lack of punctuation, the consistent repetition of clauses, and her affinity for coordinating conjunctions, results in a dislocating and often overwhelming reading experience.

The Critique of Progress

By disrupting the linearity of sentence structure and inflecting her verbs with this sense of continuity, Stein is able to linguistically play out her larger thematic concern with critiquing the teleological process of history. Barbara Will picks up on the temporally inflected peculiarity of *The Making of Americans* in *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of ‘Genius’*. She writes that ‘recalling the fanciful nineteenth-century titles of a Twain or a Melville, Stein’s ‘history’ of a
‘progress’ or ‘making’ announces a logic of temporal development wherein the past effortlessly
[gives rise to some present truth, some better way’ (Will 2000, 50). It is Stein’s use of repetition,
[Will maintains, that disrupts this developmental narrative, thereby ‘liberat[ing] difference, as
[what resembles but is never ‘exactly the same’’ (51). This repetition with difference is
[responsible for what Will calls the ‘metamorphosis’ of The Making of Americans, whereby the text
[moves from a formulaic reporting of all types of human beings into a text in process, a text
[uncertain of its own future direction’ (51). I submit that this constant shifting is achieved at the
[level of syntax as well, and Stein’s use of the progressive aspect helps to create the sense of
[move Will identifies. In other words, it is not only Stein’s repetition, but her repetition of
verbs that are already themselves repeating and ongoing, that creates this dynamic process.

The syntactic structure of The Making of Americans, therefore, eschews what Helena
Michie calls ‘the “and then” sentence at the heart of historical writing’, a linguistically
identifiable sequential ordering that results in the explicature of a linear, historical narrative
(Michie 2009, 277). Because we understand history as a series of linear events that progress
toward some identifiable end point or culmination (war, a shift in power, revolution, etc.),
historical writing remains dependent on this type of paratactic sentence construction. ‘And then’
allows meaning to orderly accrue along a causal chain, creating a unilinear narrative sequence
that works to fix events that can often more accurately be described as existing in a state of
chaos, or flux. As Michie explains, this type of sequential ordering works ‘to produce a
significant narrative of cause and effect’ which can then be more easily culturally digested (276).

Examples from the Text

In fact, Stein repeatedly invokes sequence in order to undermine its priority within her
narrative framework. In the following excerpt from the ‘Martha Hersland’ section, Stein
somewhat ironically attempts (considering the length of both this section and the entire work)
to sum up Martha’s life in a few short paragraphs: ‘This one was then once a very little one, a
baby and then a little one and then a young girl and then a woman and then older and then
later there was an ending to her and that was the history of this one’ (Stein 1995, 386). This is
what we might want to call the grand narrative of life: we are born, we get older, and we die; we
progressively move in stages away from our beginning and toward our own end. Watch,
however, how Stein works to complicate and slowly undermine the primacy of the sequence in
the next few passages:

This one always was the same one to herself and to every one to herself and to every
one when she was a very little one, a baby, and then a little one and then a bigger
one and then a very considerably bigger one and then a sick one and then no longer one.
(386)

Again, here we have a progressive movement from existence to non-existence, but tempered by
the words ‘always’ and ‘same’ that begin the passage. The next passage introduces the
progressive aspect, expanding the end point of the sequence, death, into a continuous, dynamic
process.
This one was always the same whole one to herself and to every one [...] when she was a very considerably bigger one and then she was just continuing and then when she was ending and dying. 
This one always then was the same one, [...] always she was of the independent dependent kind of them, always this was all the history of her. [...] 
In some the nature in them is clearer when they are very young, in some when they are young, in some when they are not so young, in some when they are getting older, in some when they are old ones. This one was always to every one the same one. (386)

By the end of this passage we are still given a sequence, but we understand now that Martha’s history is not actually captured within that sequence, because throughout her life she ‘has always been the same one’. We are given an alternate register here in which to think life, based not on a causal sequence that moves from youth to old age, but rather on what is present throughout, on the constancy of one’s ‘bottom nature’, (which, it is important to note, is of course itself complicated and made dynamic by the paradoxical, oscillating phrase ‘independent dependent’).

Conclusion: Stein’s Cubist Grammar

Stein believed that *The Making of Americans* was truly ‘the beginning of modern writing’, and while this is a characteristically strong claim, as Meyer reminds us, it is nonetheless indisputable (Meyer 1995, xiii). Many scholars have repeatedly linked Stein’s brand of experimental writing to the early twentieth-century cubist aesthetic of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, and her literary ‘portraits’ of Picasso and other notable modernist figures encourage this connection. Following this line of inquiry but linking it to my discussion of Stein’s syntax, I would like to end with an investigation of the affinities between Stein’s use of the continuous aspect in this text and Duchamp’s 1912 *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*, or *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2.*

This painting offers an interesting visual parallel to the temporal disruption of linearity and progress that we see in Stein’s text, realized through what we might call a type of ‘cubist grammar’. If we think of the painting’s title (which is not in the progressive but, like *The Making* in Stein’s title, invokes continuity through the -ing form of ‘descend’), it implies that we are entering a narrative in medias res, in the middle of something that might run: Fred stepped onto the staircase, and then Fred descended the staircase, and then Fred was at the bottom of the staircase. We are not only stalled in the middle of the sequence, the ‘descending’, but we are also asked to consider this action not as an identifiable static point, but rather a shifting process made up of a myriad of different perspectives and movements happening all at once.
Without positioning Stein as an inheritor of what was primarily a male dominated painterly aesthetic, I submit that what she accomplishes on both the linguistic and thematic level in *The Making of Americans* is analogous to this painting in terms of its dynamic present moment. Through what I have called the ‘radical simultaneity’ of this text, Stein’s use of the progressive aspect allows her to disrupt the traditional historical narrative. She thereby refashions this *History of a Family’s Progress* into a constantly moving, shifting thing.
Works Cited and Consulted

General Linguistics


Aspect and Tense


Tense, Aspect, and Literature


Stein: Primary Sources


Stein: Secondary Sources


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