

# Gertrude Stein: The Forerunner of Nathalie Sarraute

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In her rejection of conventional plot and characters, and her insistence on the "continuous present,"<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein anticipated many of the attitudes and objectives of the New French Novelists, not the least of which was a deliberate attempt to make the reader share the burden of creation.<sup>2</sup> One reason for her famous deletion of commas, for example, was that she considered them an "artificial aid" to bring about simplicity and believed that the reader should be willing to "disentangle rather than to cut the knot."<sup>3</sup> And in his introduction to *Narration* (a collection of four lectures delivered by Miss Stein at the University of Chicago, 1935), Thornton Wilder noted that the spare punctuation "has been explained by Miss Stein as being a form of challenge to a livelier collaboration on the part of the reader."<sup>4</sup>

Converting the reader from a passive observer to an active participant in the creative process has, of course, been a primary goal of both Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, but it is Sarraute that Gertrude Stein seems to anticipate most clearly. At times the similarity in their aims and attitudes is startling.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, there is Stein's emphasis on technique and her determinedly *scientific* attitude toward her work. Even Thornton Wilder, one of her staunchest supporters, admitted that "the fundamental occupation of Miss Stein's life was not the work of art but the shaping of a theory of knowledge, a theory of time, and a theory of the passions."<sup>6</sup>

"The business of Art," said Gertrude Stein, is "to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present."<sup>7</sup> She saw life as beginning again, over and over, in a "prolonged" or "continuous present," as she called it in "Composition as Explanation." And, because she could no longer regard things as "progressively happening," she rejected conventional plot. "A great deal perhaps all of my writing of *The Making of Americans*," she said, "was an effort to escape from this thing . . . that everything had meaning as beginning and middle and ending" (*Narration*, pp. 17, 25). In "The Gradual Making of the Making of

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<sup>1</sup>See Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *What Are Masterpieces* (Los Angeles: Conference Press, 1940), p. 31 ff. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup>For an interesting parallel between Robbe-Grillet's film *Last Year in Marienbad* and earlier works of Gertrude Stein, see Strother B. Purdy, "Gertrude Stein at Marienbad," *PMLA* 85 (Oct. 1970), 1096-1105.

<sup>3</sup>Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 220-21.

<sup>4</sup>*Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein*, introd. by Thornton Wilder (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1935), p. v.

<sup>5</sup>Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Miss Sarraute denies having been influenced in any way by the works of Gertrude Stein.

<sup>6</sup>See his introduction to *Four in America* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. x.

<sup>7</sup>"Plays," in *Lectures in America*, pp. 104-05.

Americans," she explains, "I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time." Thus the problem was "to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out . . ." (*Lectures in America*, p. 147).

Gertrude Stein also rejected traditional subject matter and traditional characterization and, like Nathalie Sarraute, set out to discover the inner reality and inner movements of her characters—the inner essence that makes people what they are. In "Portraits and Repetition," Stein said, "I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did . . . but I had to find it out by the intensity of *movement* that there was inside in any one of them" (italics mine). Again, "I must find out what is moving inside them that makes them them, and I must find out how I by the thing moving excitedly inside me can make a portrait of them" (*Lectures in America*, p. 183).

As a student of psychology, Gertrude Stein made a point of listening closely to the conversation of others and soon became aware of what Sarraute was later to call "sub-conversation," those subterranean *movements* which take place on the threshold of consciousness. What fascinated Stein was "what they did say while they were saying what they were saying"—that is, the message beneath the words. And this led her to recognize that what seemed to be repetition was not necessarily so, and to make a distinction between repetition and "insistency." The one is a mere rephrasing, the other a reexperiencing.<sup>8</sup>

"The question of repetition is very important. It is important because there is no such thing as repetition," Stein said elsewhere, explaining that although "everybody tells every story in about the same way," there is always a slight variation in what is said or the way it is said; "the only thing that is repetition is when somebody tells you what he has learned"—the latter being a matter of *memory*, rather than *felt-knowledge*, knowledge that is *experienced*.<sup>9</sup>

But there was a further reason for Gertrude Stein's penchant for repetition. To begin with, she felt that the best way to get at the inner reality she sought was by unconscious creativity (when working on *Tender Buttons*, she even experimented with automatic handwriting). She not only wanted to forget her audience (which makes one create according to someone else's expectations), but to forget herself, to escape self-consciousness in any way possible, letting the creative impulse come from the inside out, unaided by rational or conscious thought. Hence she chose her words not so much for their rational meaning as for some inherent quality functioning on a preverbal level—something felt rather than thought. In fact, she hated to use new words because they had no "existing being" for her.<sup>10</sup> And when she says (as she does in "How Writing is Written") that she deliberately limited her vocabulary to *avoid* association ("While I was writing I didn't want, when I used a word, to make it carry with it too many associations"), she is talking about *conscious* associations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup>See "How Writing is Written," the transcript of a talk given in 1935 at the Choate School, Wallingford, Conn., in *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, ed. William Rose Benét and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Oxford, 1938), II, 1451.

<sup>10</sup>See Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), p. 306.

<sup>11</sup>*Oxford Anthology*, II, 1450.

Furthermore, in "Portraits and Repetition" she admits that "I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description" (*Lectures in America*, p. 191)—that is, it was not their descriptive qualities but the "existing being" that they had for her which made them meaningful. Increasingly, Stein attempted to use words as a bridge to preverbal thought; and repetition (or "insistency"), because it dulls the conscious mind ("Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"), became a useful device for reaching beyond the cognitive to precognitive levels.<sup>12</sup>

That Miss Stein shared Nathalie Sarraute's interest in "sub-conversation"—and for similar reasons—is demonstrated in a number of her statements. Explaining "The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans," Stein wrote, "I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people, I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the *movement* of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different" (*Lectures in America*, p. 138; italics mine).

Having recognized similar elements in "the bottom nature" of people, Stein came to believe that there were certain basic types (inner types—not the superficially described characters of traditional fiction which are described from the *outside*), and that if she looked and listened long enough, intently enough, "I could finally describe really describe every kind of human being that ever was or is or would be living" (*Lectures in America*, p. 142). Thus *The Making of Americans*, which began as a history of her own family, also became a study of basic types, a project that she planned to continue in *A Long Gay Book*. As originally conceived, the latter was "to describe not only every possible kind of a human being, but every possible kind of pairs of human beings and every possible threes and fours and fives of human beings and every possible kind of crowds of human beings" (*Lectures in America*, p. 148). That she regarded the project (never fully carried out) as a scientific undertaking is suggested by a later comment in the same essay (p. 156): "When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything."

As with Sarraute, the scientific approach to personality and the concern for universal types resulted in depersonalized characters and abstracted essences; and, inevitably—as with Sarraute—the attempt to generalize led to the increased use of pronouns and the pointed avoidance of proper names, as we find in "Many Many Women," "A Family of Three Perhaps," and in the following passage from "Four Dishonest Ones: Told by a Description of What They Do": "One is what she is. She does not need to be changing. She is what she is. She is not changing. She is what she is." Further "She has been living and working, she has been quiet and working, she has been suffering and working, she has been watching and working, she has been waiting, she has been working, she has been waiting and working, she is not needing to be changing."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>In his introduction to *Four in America*, Thornton Wilder noted that Stein "is tracking down certain irrational ways we have of knowing things, of believing things, and of being governed by these ways of believing." See p. xvi.

<sup>13</sup>Gertrude Stein, *Portraits and Prayers* (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 57.

Like Gertrude Stein, Nathalie Sarraute's interest in psychology led her to reject the traditional approach to character and to seek an inner reality beneath the surface—a reality she pursued with the avid determination of a scientist devoted to "research," a term she used repeatedly when referring to her work.

What I am trying to express cannot be confined within the framework of the traditional novel. Although I deliberately place myself in the domain of psychology, it is of a type that is different from the classical psychology based on analysis of sentiments and character.

I study the psychological movements while they are forming, at the very moment of birth, so to speak, of reactions which cannot be perceived directly and clearly by the conscious mind, for the reason that they take place very rapidly, somewhere on the edge of consciousness. It is the invisible but very real movements . . . which give meaning to our actions and to our words. They go beyond the individual as he is shown in the traditional novel, and they constitute, in fact, the principal element of my research.<sup>14</sup>

Convinced that dialogue is taking the place left by action in the modern novel, a dialogue which is "the outward continuation of subterranean movements" which "cloak" themselves in words, Sarraute attempts to render these subterranean movements by a technique she calls "sub-conversation."<sup>15</sup> The reader is expected to recognize that the actual movements themselves take place on the edge of consciousness on a preverbal level which the author is obliged to interpret—a difficult task, at best. Hence Sarraute feels a particular admiration for Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose stilted dialogue, she believes, is not supposed to represent real conversation, but "the fluctuating frontier that separates conversation from sub-conversation" (*Age of Suspicion*, p. 114).

Not surprisingly, Sarraute's attempt to render the inexpressible has led her to use words much as Stein did. As the unnamed writer explains in *Between Life and Death*, words are all that matter; they are the "conductors through which the same waves pass": ". . . words repeated countless times with all their intonations . . . and their that which is neither an image, nor a word, nor a tone, nor any sound . . . a movement rather, a brief flexing of muscles, leaps, grovelings, recoilings, gropings . . ."<sup>16</sup>

Sarraute has no interest in character development as such. In fact, she readily admits that her characters are merely props for the inner movements she wishes to render. She does not *want* to create any "personality" that the reader can identify with. Hence her dependence on pronouns and her deliberate avoidance of proper names. But despite her rejection of conventional types (described according to *externals* in appearance and behavior), her recognition of similar elements in what Stein called the "bottom natures" of people has led her, inevitably, to develop character types of her own: nameless, faceless creatures exhibiting universalized traits. In *Tropisms*, for example, sketch I describes "the mothers," forming "compact, motionless little knots" before the shop windows,

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<sup>14</sup>From a statement written for the book jacket of Nathalie Sarraute, *The Planetarium*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1960). Though the term *recherche* can be translated in various ways, the context makes it clear that Sarraute's use of the term is equivalent to our *research*. See her use of the word in *L'ère du Soupçon: Essais sur le Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), pp. 17, 53, 139, 141.

<sup>15</sup>See "Conversation and Sub-conversation," in *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1963), pp. 98-99.

<sup>16</sup>Nathalie Sarraute, *Between Life and Death*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1969), pp. 173-74.

emanating "a strange quietude, a sort of desperate satisfaction" as they look at piles of linen or dolls with eyes that light up. Sketch VI depicts the domineering wife and mother who manipulates her family in the name of "things"; and sketch IX, the vapid, submissive female one finds threatening. "She was sitting crouched on a corner of the chair, squirming, her neck outstretched, her eyes bulging. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes,' she said, and then confirmed each part of the sentence with a jerk of her head. She was frightening, mild and flat, quite smooth, and only her eyes were bulging. 'There was something distressing, disquieting about her and her mildness was threatening.'"<sup>17</sup>

In regard to the character types she herself has created, Sarraute's defense, of course, is that she is trying to communicate something which takes place on a preverbal level, the indefinable, extremely rapid movements or sensations that hide behind one's gestures and beneath one's words; and to do this, she must seek "equivalent images" which will make the reader "experience analogous sensations." "Nothing could distract my attention from them and nothing should distract that of the reader; neither the personality of the characters, nor the plot, by means of which, ordinarily, the characters evolve. The barely visible, anonymous character was to serve as a mere prop for these movements, which are inherent in everybody and can take place in anybody, at any moment."<sup>18</sup>

What is interesting is the similarity in the efforts of Sarraute and Stein to force words to communicate feelings or "movements" which occur on a preverbal level. What is also interesting is that both women approach their work as scientists rather than artists. And, significantly, the end result, in both cases, has been a tendency toward generalized, abstracted types, and a technique which demands a great deal of the reader.

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<sup>17</sup>*Tropisms*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1967), p. 23. "Tropisms" is the term which Sarraute uses for the subterranean movements she seeks to convey.

<sup>18</sup>See the Foreword to *Tropisms*, p. vii.