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The Composition of Sense in Gertrude Stein's Landscape

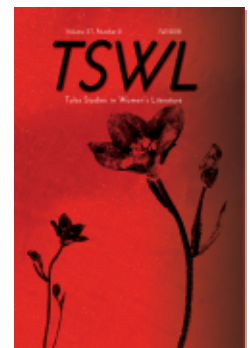
Writing by Linda Voris (review)

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THE COMPOSITION OF SENSE IN GERTRUDE STEIN'S
LANDSCAPE WRITING, by Linda Voris. American Literature
Readings in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 264 pp.
\$109.99 cloth; \$84.99 ebook.

Linda Voris's *The Composition of Sense in Gertrude Stein's Landscape Writing* is, quite simply, a game-changer for Stein scholarship. This important monograph proposes a radical new critical approach to Stein's work by adopting an interpretative methodology that is both drawn from and receptive to what Voris argues was Stein's own approach to composition and meaning, one developed in the 1920s and inspired by her study of landscape, especially the landscapes of Paul Cézanne's country, Provence. Having come out the other side of this compact but intellectually rigorous study, I am still trying to figure out exactly how Voris did it. The virtuosity of Voris's close readings and the book's sheer intellectual achievement mark it as a monumental contribution to the field of Stein scholarship.

The study consists of seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Following a dense introduction ("The Force of Landscape"), Voris conducts a meticulous study of Stein's writings of the early 1920s, limiting herself to "texts written in succession and over a brief period of time" (p. 3). That the study is "limit[ed]" is Voris's proposition, but I never felt the study to be lacking in content or scope (p. 3). While Voris anchors her study in 1920s Provence, the landscape followed Stein back to Paris in the form of several of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904) paintings, which remained prominently displayed on Stein's atelier walls.

Voris contends that Stein's writings *do* make sense—contrary to the claims of figures such as Wyndham Lewis—and that she is the author who can finally provide readers with a key to these supposedly hermetic texts. Voris is not the first scholar to claim this, but her theory on Stein's "unique" and "radical epistemology" is one I think Stein herself would be satisfied with and one that has done full justice to the complexity of Stein's work (p. 3). Voris proposes that Stein's use of a "landscape homology" across successively composed texts in the early 1920s "enact[s] a radical epistemology, a mode of understanding the interrelatedness of meaning, experience, and language practice"—an epistemology wherein "what constitutes meaning . . . is understood as compositional rather than representational" (pp. 3, 2). In the writings from this period, Voris argues that Stein "reconfigure[s] explanation with the temporal properties she has explored in landscape writing so that explanation unfolds with a quality of immediacy" akin to seeing, or experiencing, landscape (p. 13). But how exactly does Stein do this? And more specifically, how does she do this without conforming or reverting to what Voris calls "the mimetic basis of representation" (p. 13)? A particular achievement of this book is that Voris

manages to outline convincingly *how* Stein alternately looked at landscapes and translated this visual experience of spatial composition into a textual environment and a compositionally bound textual experience.

Voris suggests that Stein's engagement with the visual goes far beyond that of her contemporaries, and indeed, this book makes Stein's indebtedness to Cézanne explicit. I have long accepted Stein's insistence that her study of landscape was an essential facet of her aesthetic credo and development. At the same time, however, I have felt that critical studies of Stein's engagement with the visual arts often rely on appropriating the techniques of the artist or movement in a way that renders their dynamic compositional approach metaphorical. Voris manages to avoid this pitfall while explaining how Stein's study of landscape manifests in her writings and how exactly Stein took visual elements and repurposed them into language. This major achievement is to be commended, as it was no doubt difficult to bring the study together in such a nuanced, lucid, and authoritative manner.

Contextualization comes through the work of William James and Gilles Deleuze, who provide a happy counterpoint to Stein's theories. There is no sense here that Stein is being melded to suit the theories of Deleuze. Rather, Voris uncovers what appears to be a series of remarkable affinities between the two. Deleuze's work is difficult, however, and while Voris does an admirable job of elucidating it, nonetheless it was here and in the introductory chapter that I struggled most. Indeed, one of the lighter recurring motifs that runs throughout the book is the problem of Stein's difficulty. Voris's study makes clear that Stein's work is even more difficult than scholars have given her credit for. While the difficulty of Stein's work and Voris's study may deter all but the most determined undergraduates or non-academic readers, it will not, I think, deter what I imagine to be its primary audience: Stein enthusiasts, Stein scholars, and Stein specialists.

Voris builds on the strongest aspects of her predecessors' work, and her critiques of them, when they occur, are measured, good-natured, and often valid. I admire Voris's graciousness in assessing the contributions of Marjorie Perloff and, in particular, how she manages to sift the facets of Ulla E. Dydo's work she wishes to build on from those she does not, such as Dydo's tendency to revert to Stein's biography in search of clues to the meaning of her writings. Voris's study is a breath of fresh air for scholars tired of or disenchanted with the longstanding critical tendency to read Stein's work biographically or to overemphasize the supposed centrality of biography to her writings—attentions that are vastly different than those afforded her modernist peers. In this respect then, the following endnote where Voris encapsulates in a few lines a major tenet of her critical approach, is simple, to the point, and displays admirable restraint:

We may take it as a given that Stein's love for [her partner Alice] Toklas underwrites all her work, but what do we gain by claiming, as Dydo does, that '[l]oving and writing collapse into one' in this piece? When we so fix the meaning of a phrase with biographical context . . . we cease to examine what it comes to mean in the composition. (p. 66, n. 10)

This study firmly establishes Voris as a leading Stein scholar, and her work can be situated alongside the writings of Sharon Kirsch, Janet Boyd, and Sarah Posman, key figures in this growing turn in Stein studies to focus on the writings themselves instead of their author. In Voris then, we finally have the very reader not only that Stein wished for but also that her work so deserves.

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A CURIOUS PERIL: H.D.'S LATE MODERNIST PROSE, by Lara Vetter. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. 278 pp. \$79.95 cloth.

With the publication of *A Curious Peril: H.D.'s Late Modernist Prose*, Lara Vetter participates in a critical renaissance in H.D. studies. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist poets and scholars recovered H.D. from the shadows of Ezra Pound and other high modernists to unearth her literary critiques of patriarchal gender and sexual norms. Over the last decade, outstanding studies, including those by Adelaide Morris and Annette Debo, have exemplified a second wave of scholarship that explores H.D.'s cultural and social investments, inclusive of and extending beyond gender critique. *A Curious Peril*, which thoroughly accounts for the modernist's overlooked late-career prose, ought to be counted amongst this auspicious company.

Renewed interest in H.D. is partly owed to recent recovery efforts, which have offered new editions of lesser-known prose texts and have made available previously unpublished fiction dating from during and after the Second World War. Vetter herself has edited the recent reprint of H.D.'s *By Avon River* (1949). To date, aside from these editions' introductions and a handful of journal articles, this newly recovered work has received scant critical attention. *A Curious Peril* begins to rectify this oversight by investigating what often is called H.D.'s postwar fiction "trilogy," all authored under the pseudonym Delia Alton—*The Sword Went Out to Sea: Synthesis of a Dream* (1946-1947, published 2007), *White Rose and the Red* (1947-1948, published 2009), and *The Mystery* (1948-1951, published 2009)—as well as the aforementioned *By Avon River* (republished 2014) and the espionage story *Magic Mirror* (1955-1956, published 2012).