

WHAT TO MAKE OF THE MAKING OF AMERICANS

An Introduction to Reading

IN A CULTURAL MOMENT WHEN ATTENTION SPANS ARE ALLEGEDLY becoming ever shorter, a moment when thoughts with the widest audience are limited to 140 characters, it can seem anachronistic if not outright perverse to return to Gertrude Stein's longest novel. Not only is Stein a notoriously "difficult" writer, as any blind carafe would attest, but while the ambitious reader might willingly wade through the slim volume of *Tender Buttons*, the prospect of nearly a thousand pages of Gertrude Stein comes across as daunting as a Channel swim. So much easier to read, or teach, or even literally pick up *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, so much more riveting the story of Stein's actual life than its purported rendition in her own words. In a moment when even the professional readers in English departments are vexed by questions of reading now, how we might or ought to be reading differently—no longer with the paranoid suspicion of the classic close-reading strategy but rather, now, reparatively, or at the surface, or crunching the data to detect patterns from a distance, or close but not deep—it is all the more urgent to turn to Stein's novel for what lessons it holds for our contemporary concerns about reading, and living, in a shifting representational mediascape.

Unmaking The Making of Americans: Toward an Aesthetic Ontology is a book about the queer temporal, emotional, consensual, and aesthetic aspects of reading. Although it takes this novel as its exemplar, I argue that reading in a broader sense fosters an aesthetic relation to the object (the part-virtual, part-material object we call a text). Examining this aesthetic relation keys into a number of vibrant conversations in literary studies: about temporality, narrative, emotion, and especially aesthetics (figured most recently as questions of form). In a moment where the pressure to quantify, assess, viralize, render into information, or reduce to fungible data any

and all communications, we should pause to consider ways of relating to signification other than purely instrumental ones. My choice of *The Making of Americans*, a novel that to some seems to arrive *sui generis*, is not meant to be representative; rather, the novel is the crux of this investigation into aesthetic ontology precisely because it demonstrates that mode of being so convincingly.¹ It does what it does, and we can learn from that doing.

I turn to the aesthetic not as an oppositional counter to the instrumental—after all, Bauhaus and design thinking more generally established in the twentieth century the instrumentalization of beauty or sensory appeal—but as a shift of focus toward how we relate to objects, whether we use them or value them in their exchangeability or hold on to them for sentimentality. Aesthetic relations offer a way to think about how we not only cognize objects but experience them, foregrounding the process of working between the sensory appeals to the imagination and the cognitive appeals of understanding as we explore a relation to the object, the thing to which our attention is directed. This approach emphasizes the object relation—how we perceive the object, understand ourselves in response to it, how we take the object in or distance ourselves from it, and how the object itself becomes possible. The richness of this relation takes place in time (whether an instant or a longer, contemplative duration), charged with affect as well as with meaning, and quite often the temporal organization of that affect and meaning relies on narrative (although it could depend instead on lyric, for instance). My book shows how these four seemingly distinct facets—time, story, affect, and sensory appeal—are in fact deeply interrelated, often in surprising ways. Each facet contributes to what I am calling an “aesthetic ontology,” a way of being that treats objects differently in that it is founded on a subject/object relation attuned to others’ relation to that object. In aesthetic ontology, objects are not inert, subordinate, controllable, purely material things but dynamic, responsive, hybridly symbolic and material peers. This relation is aesthetic because it engages both understanding and imagination; it is empirically based but also interpretive and reflexive. Finally, this relation not only impinges on the nature of the object but also the relation of the subject to others, with whom the interpretation can be shared.

I use the phrase “aesthetic ontology” to signal the philosophical tradition out of which this book emerges. On the one hand, my project works

1. For example, Spahr notes that “[o]ften the criticism of Stein seems caught between readings of her work as ‘*sui generis*’ and readings of it as cultural” (23), a remark she attributes to Marjorie Perloff on 20 October 1999.

from an engagement with Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology, which sees human beings as fundamentally interpretive subjects—a view not only very generative for poststructuralist theories of the subject but also queerly resonant with psychoanalytical ones. On the other hand, my book draws on Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory, with its difficult concept of subjective universalism, which raises questions about the nature of consensus and the possibility of sharing individual experience with others. But where Kant focuses on nature and visual art, I focus on the lisible text, bringing the hermeneutic problem Heidegger raises to bear on thinking about the third *Critique's* insistence on the sensible as well as the intelligible. Interpretation, in this view, is not simply about meaning in the informational sense but also about meaning in the sense of affective charge or tenor.

But this book does not simply offer a synthesis of Heidegger and Kant. A third factor in my choice of “aesthetic ontology” is the lessons I learned from Isobel Armstrong's turn against the anti-aesthetic that was dominant toward the end of the twentieth century. Her radical aesthetic countered the theoretical writings of Kant's and Heidegger's philosophical heirs in the hermeneutics of suspicion and reclaimed the aesthetic as a deeply rooted democratic concept that touches on “playing and dreaming, thinking and feeling”; indeed, as she continues, “ceaseless mediation endows language-making and symbol-making thought, and the life of affect, with creative and cognitive life. These processes—experiences that keep us alive—are common to everyone” (2). Armstrong's broadening of the aesthetic to include how we live, to be a fundamental aspect of our experience is made possible by her expanding the canon of aesthetic theory. She draws not only on Kant and Hegel, but John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, D. W. Winnicott, and Paul Ricoeur to develop her claim that the “uncoupling of the aesthetic and privilege can and does take place” and in order to resolve the impasse between those on the left and the right who had ossified the aesthetic into being politically impotent and culturally futile, and not a dynamic category (4).²

2. After Armstrong's book, a slew of other analyses of the aesthetic have gained traction, alongside though not entirely equivalent to the affective turn in humanities. To name a few, Ross's *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy* hews to the Kant/Hegel/Heidegger/contemporary French genealogy; Rancière's whole range of engagements with the problem of the aesthetic and his own formulation of the notion of aesthesis has been extremely influential; Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* more recently unites both the aesthetic line—understood as formalist analysis—and the affective line of inquiry in ways I'm quite sympathetic to and impressed by.

To develop the notion of aesthetic ontology requires an object to relate to, and *Unmaking The Making of Americans* takes as its case study Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*. An expansive tome which aims to tell the "complete history of many women and many men" (295), Stein's book has a democratic spirit to it, an apt demonstration of Armstrong's radical aesthetic. As Stein reflected decades later, "My intention was to cover every possible variety of human type in it. . . . I wanted each one to have the same value. I was not at all interested in the little or the big men but to realize absolutely every variety of human experience that was possible to have, every type, every style, every nuance" ("Transatlantic" 503). Stein's interest in casting the everyday in a new form suggests a likely site for building on Armstrong's insights.

Stein's novel is famously unread: written between 1903 and 1911, but not published until 1925 and then not even widely and fully available until 1995, the novel has accrued a peculiar gauntlet of critics refusing to read or resisting reading it, almost as a badge of honor.³ As Natalie Cecire points out, "Stein's unreadable style has been taken as evidence of her genius and of fraud in equal measure" (284), frequently on the same grounds. What sets Stein apart could be put down to one's disposition towards a demanding text by a female author (there seems to be no similar problem with demanding texts by male authors; the elusiveness of *Finnegan's Wake*, for instance, serves as further attestation of Joyce's genius, whether in the field of literature or prank). A reader's frustration with Stein may be compounded by the fact that it is precisely the hallmarks of her style that make it seem like Stein's text *should* be accessible. Confronted with the simplicity of Stein's vocabulary, her privileging of aesthetic aspects of language like sound and pattern over

3. Cecire meticulously traces the history of this not-reading of Stein, taking it back to Edmund Wilson's influential 1931 declaration of Stein's novel as unreadable, and herself concluding that "Stein has been challenging the status of reading for a hundred years" (283). Clement lists the criticisms that Stein's novel accrued

by most of its early twentieth century readers who claimed the text was unreadable, that its author wrote "a disaster" by creating "tireless and inert repetitiveness which becomes as stupefying as it is unintelligible", and that it "amounts in the end to linguistic murder" (Aiken, 1934, p. 39). In the twenty-first century, critics still bemoan the novel as "monumentally tedious," with one critic arguing that *Making* proves Stein "is really a terrible novelist with not the vaguest sense of what constitutes a novel" (Levitt, 2001, p. 505) (Clement, "Thing," 362).

informational aspects of language, and her apparent reliance on repetition, we think we should be able to just read Stein.

So why don't readers "get" Stein? could certainly be a question to pose, albeit not a promising one insofar as it implies there is a "getting" of Stein, a right reading that clarifies all. I would be very skeptical of such a claim for any text. Nor does such a question engage the intellectual issues surrounding time, affect, sensibility, and imagination that I see at work in the novel, or in aesthetic ontology per se; so it is not a question for me to pursue to develop how form and being might be articulated through representation ("articulated" here in a dual sense of expressed as well as "jointed" or "segmented"). My particular object choice for this investigation of aesthetic ontology, however, means that my concern is inevitably also about the practices of reading, the difficulty of reading, and even the impossibility of reading. Stein's novel should be more widely read—and certainly should be read by anyone interested in current discussions of time, queer theory, narratology, or the affective turn in literary studies. Yet I chose this novel because it radically challenges our understanding of temporality, emotion, aesthetics, and narrative precisely by unmaking our habits of reading. "Unmaking" is a necessary step towards realizing an aesthetic ontology; it requires the same step back for reflection and enriched apprehension that an aesthetic relation affords.

In her book, Stein develops an expanded, nonlinear, layered consideration of time and being that reverberates through changing expressions of emotion over the course of the novel; realizes aesthetic judgment as a temporal, dynamic process; and produces a time-image decades before Gilles Deleuze locates it in the crisis of midcentury Italian neorealism. This novel thus provides an important challenge to and a vital way of rethinking both Kantian aesthetics and Heideggerian hermeneutics, and the synthesis of these two leads me to end with Deleuze's Kantian-influenced philosophy of medium itself.

Of course, what makes Kant and Heidegger even useful for reading with Stein on these questions of aesthetic ontology—on how we relate to objects, to other subjects, through empirical and imagined experiences—is the anti-foundationalist line of inquiry developed in poststructuralist and related thinking about signs and subjects in the 1960s–80s, in which Deleuze is a principal participant. Stein has long been read by American avant-garde writers like the language poets who are skeptical of mimesis or playful about the referential power of representation. Yet as Bob Perelman points out, it is the theoretical insights of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva that "make

it possible to read . . . [Stein's] work with something other than irritation or scorn" (134). More importantly, Stein's prescience extends beyond her literary innovation to redound upon our theory-inflected discussions about the nature of being, language, medium, and aesthetics. I thus approach *The Making of Americans* as a work of theory in conversation with other theorists.⁴

Each of my chapters works through close readings of Stein's novel and a philosophical interlocutor, tracking how the theoretical question under consideration develops in particular moments of the novel's and the philosophical argument's evolution. My trajectory arcs across such questions as: how is time representable, how do we feel emotion, how can we agree on a shared reality if interpretation and imagination intervene, and how can we represent this rich experience within particular media? The close readings open up the broader theory, which I explicate by pairing Stein's novel with a series of interlocutors: Martin Heidegger on temporality; Richard Wollheim, Charles Altieri, and Antonio Damasio on emotion theory; Immanuel Kant on aesthetics and consensus; and Gilles Deleuze on the cinematic and the limits of narrative. Homing in on the different concerns and phases and styles that the novel moves through enables me to engage that chapter's interlocutor (Heidegger or Altieri, say) with Stein's take on those ideas (e.g., time as nonlinear or consensus as a temporal dynamic of shared feeling). So on the one hand, the novel serves as a coconspirator with the philosophical text, as they converge on illuminating the aspect of aesthetic ontology under consideration; on the other hand, the novel serves as the specimen text to demonstrate how the theory plays out, showing aesthetic ontology at work. These two levels combine to create a composite picture of theory and practice. Just as a close reading of a single sentence in a text opens up a vantage on much larger questions with which that work engages,

4. As Carmello points out in arguing for "Gertrude Stein as Exemplary Theorist," Stein rejected theorizing in favor of "creative thinking"; the former, he says, "means the adoption of a spectatorial, if not voyeuristic distance from the thing being observed and from the process of observation and inevitably issues in an abstractionism Stein regarded as pornographic" (4), while the latter "means the growth of ideas through the constant struggle to express concretely not only meaning of the thing being observed but also the meaning of the manner of observation and the meaning of the mode of its presentation" (4). My own view in reading Stein as theory here is to learn from her practice, thus approaching more in the vein of "creative thinking" but picking up on the visual roots found in etymology of "theory" to construe it as an observation at close range.

so too does my approach scale from this single specimen text to how it serves as a keyhole through which we spy on a much larger horizon of concerns.

My critical approach is distinct from the more conventional, thematic treatments of an author's work or oeuvre, precisely because rather than be guided by a central, cumulative, or even centripetal question, I show how close attention to the novel takes us outward into different, albeit linked, questions of temporality, emotional experience, consensus, representation—in short, key axes that simultaneously bring individuals together and mark their discreteness from one another, the very tension that the novel explores. Not coincidentally, these are also key axes of novels as a genre, insofar as the novel employs compound narrative times to engage us emotionally and aesthetically. Mine is a different mode of criticism, a centrifugal practice; instead of assembling a range of texts to show how they converge on a central issue, I refract a range of seemingly disparate issues from a single text in order to put those aspects in conversation with one another. The final chapter, therefore, orients not toward a conclusion but toward an opening out, positing Stein's novel in relation to Matisse's cutouts and to cinema, to think through the relation of form and time.

This centrifugal method of working outward from the novel performs a kind of reading that I call an "unmaking" of the text. By "unmaking," I mean that I work from investigative exploration close to the surface of the language, from what might even be called a "bare reading" of Stein's text: trying to see the words that are actually on the page. So much interferes with our reading of any text. It is as if we cannot have access to the text's meaning in any truly direct sense: there will always be the paradigmatic associations around the punctum of each sentence; there will always be our wished-for readings; there will be our inevitable misrecognitions of a word, a phrase, an implication, a tonality. The text is always haunted by what we think it should say, what we are already sure that it says, and rumors we have heard regarding what it was really about. *The Making of Americans* is a prime candidate as a case study for unmaking because it requires—one might say demands—that we attend to the words on the page. This can be quite tedious, especially the first time through. Stein's writing can be baffling to linearly oriented readers because she emphasizes language's associative and poetic qualities rather than its referential power (that is, its capacity to convey information). The novel is pretty relentless in its nonmimetic agenda, in not letting us see through the language to a diegetic world for very long. Stein's temporal innovations rework fundamental storytelling

operations identified by classic narratology, blurring the boundary between scene and summary, or twisting discourse and story (for instance). That said, it is important to take seriously the idea that this *is* a novel, that as a novel it retains a certain formal investment in the linear, even if this is not deployed as a progression in any simple or overdetermined sense (never mind its subtitle purporting to be about “progress”).⁵

For these reasons, I have been interested in how this text demands to be read, in reflecting on the experience of reading the novel, and in how to articulate the experience of reading—and not in a reader-response kind of way, but precisely as an aesthetic relation with the text, one that seeks to synthesize sensory appeal with understanding, pleasure with knowledge. And I found that the novel’s demand to be read necessitated putting it in conversation with other texts, theoretical and philosophical, that have approached many of the same questions that the novel endeavors to apprehend or even perform. Hence my stance that Stein’s novel is a work of theory, in the best sense: rigorously observing and extrapolating from those observations an account of how reality can be represented. “Unmaking” is the technique I learned from the novel, working through close attention to the sentences’ dynamics to think theoretically, to stage encounters with questions of aesthetic ontology and the pleasures of form. My aim in this case study is to illuminate how the text itself functions as an aesthetic object, produced in relation to the reader’s experience and making us reflect on how that relation transpires. It’s a curious object, one with a certain degree of power to act upon the subject insofar as the text obstinately resists our habits of reading but keeps us coming back to it.

Although “unmaking” requires a close attention to the text, I must acknowledge that I have learned to read this text’s tutelage in reading through a long-term inculcation in close reading. Since “close reading” has been the focus of a lively debate in literary studies of late, I feel the need to define and clarify what I understand it to be. A handy definition for “close reading” I might locate in Jane Gallop’s claim that “it is a method of undoing the

5. Stein has remarked both that this is a novel (“in the three novels written in this generation . . . in Proust, in *The Making of Americans*, in *Ulysses*” [Look 109]) and implied that it is not (“There has been nothing that you could honestly call a novel. There has not been one in the Twentieth Century with the possible exception of Proust” [“Transatlantic” 507]). Her narrator says it “is not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversations to amuse you, but a record,” attesting to its documentary power, but also triangulating the other two seemingly contradictory statements. I argue, however, that this is a novel and it is plausible to read it as such.

training that keeps us to the straight and narrow path of main ideas” (8). While her term “undoing” obviously resonates with my notion of “unmaking,” I am more interested in how this definition offers a refinement on a comparison Gallop has just made when this definition appears, where she likens close reading to the interruptions of a child being read aloud to: “[R]ead to a young child sometime, you will notice she has the annoying habit of interrupting the flow of the story to draw attention to some minor thing” (8). With this comparison, Gallop illustrates how mature readers focus on the core point and dismiss the trivial—things like the sound of words, the diction, the repetitions—all, in short, the key elements of Stein’s style I just enumerated. This coincidence goes some way towards explaining the grown-up reader’s frustration with Stein. We reading Stein now must position ourselves more as the interrupting child than the parent who is reading toward lights out and wishes to brook no delays or digressions from that aim.⁶ Close reading Stein, by which I mean reading Stein, necessitates reading childish, even perversely, for what we discover in the moment of reading, rather than what conclusion we aim toward.⁷

Remarkably, Gallop closes her argument with the definition that close reading is “learning to hear what’s really on the page, listening closely to the other, and being willing to catch what the other actually says, and be able to hear what we didn’t expect him to say” (16). I say “remarkably,” because the acoustic terms of Gallop’s definition of close reading, both here and earlier, are remarkable in the account of a practice typically understood as visual. While Gallop’s turn to a different distance sense directs her argument towards her other titular term, ethics, and in particular the notion that how we relate to the text is also how we should relate to other people, and vice versa, I’m interested in how this acoustical turn resonates with the figure of the interrupting child being read to.

What is silent in Gallop’s comparison of the acoustical relations of close reading is that the child’s interruption disrupts linearity, requires the reader

6. Along similar lines, Stein relates an anecdote about meeting “three young newspapermen and a photographer” on her lecture tour to the United States in the thirties. “The only one of the four of them who understood my writing was the photographer. He said ‘I don’t have to remember what you say. I am not involved with the mechanics of remembering it, and so I can understand it. They are too busy trying to remember what you say’” (“Transatlantic” 515).

7. As perhaps an example of childish reading, when I have taught this book, whether at the graduate or undergraduate levels, I have students read aloud for the first hour of the class. See McCallum, “Americans Aloud.”

to go back or diverge from the line of the sentence. This is precisely how Stein's novel operates, as I discuss in chapter 1, and why we might begin to understand our relation to it as a dynamic and aesthetic relation; that is, an aesthetic relation is necessarily dynamic, necessarily negotiating meaning and feeling, and is fundamentally about relating to others, through multiple senses. Gallop's claim that "reading, by which I now mean close reading, can school us for all our close encounters. And then maybe, just maybe, we could learn not only to read better but fight and love more fairly" (17) nicely wraps up this image of an ethical relation. The move is very similar to one that more recent critics of close reading have been crucially skeptical of: namely, the idea that reading gets us anywhere, politically, socially, morally.⁸ Staying with Gallop's definition, however, I want to resist such a neat tie-up—without appealing to authorial intention, but in fact because the argument leads us there. If close reading is the interrupting child, the end is not the point. The end may be necessary, but it is not the locus of interest. If we are to hear what the text is really saying, then we have also to listen to the child pointing it out—that is, someone who is not interested in getting to the end, getting the point, and may be actively subverting our normative insistence on such a linear trajectory. Gallop's acoustical definition of close reading elicits an understanding of close reading as an iterative practice of constant recalibration in relation to the other, one that thus is more unwieldy—in a generative, lively, pleasurable, copresent way—than the spectacular lucidity of her writing might initially suggest.

Gallop's style is famously, one might say exemplarily, clear. Clarity, of course, is a feature of "good writing," a mode of expression that renders the surface of the text transparent or unobtrusive so that we can readily access the meaning. It might be seen as ironic that such a fluent close reader writes so unobscurely—surely it is particularly difficult, complex, or indirect texts that most benefit from close reading, because their flourishes would be more capable of concealing or being reticent about what they are really saying? What could we possibly find in such clear—evident, direct, accessible—style? If I were to characterize Gallop's style, I would note that she frequently marks her texts' rhetorical moves, whether it is the definition, the comparison, the example, or the turns in her argument. Her tone tends

8. Rooney notes that "Best and Marcus identify a fantasy of freedom, specifically a 'heroic' freedom, as symptoms of symptomatic readings" (116), while those critics claim they are "skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation" (2).

to the matter-of-fact, punctuated by occasional vivid illustrations like the interrupting child or, earlier in her career, confessional moments. And yet it is precisely the rigor of her writing that opens out the other meanings—the acoustical figure on which she doesn't comment, but certainly is there on the page to be seen. Or heard.

The idea that reading can be concerned with what is there to be seen on the page motivates a recent turn to “surface reading,” the touchstone of which is Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's polemical introduction to a special issue of *representations*. In their argument for surface reading, “The Way We Read Now,” symptomatic reading stands in for a dominant practice of close reading, a way we used to read that “took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (1). As this description indicates, such an approach implicitly establishes a power relation of an active and determining subject over an inert or passive object. This power relation is reinforced as they continue: “We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious” (1). On the face of it, this claim's tense progression seems to suggest that symptomatic reading is “over”—it is so twentieth century. And while Faulkner's reminder of the persistence of the past may suggest a likely counterargument (symptomatic reading is never dead; it isn't even past), their move in the immediate next paragraph is striking: “So much for the way we read. What about ‘now?’” (1).

The trajectory of the paragraph in which Best and Marcus describe symptomatic reading moves from past to present tense: the taking of meaning, the training and attachment that formed around that meaning-making practice, is all described in past tense, whether active or passive (took, were trained, became attached). But the last verb is “find”—actively present. If we reading now find it hard to let go of the belief that readers and texts have an unconscious, perhaps that difficulty signals an investment in a power relation between the two that is not subject-interpreter dominating the object-text. I do not mean to put this suspiciously, but rather to raise the question of what this text is opening out for us—what should we be hearing—with this plain shift to present tense. The turn to the next paragraph, moreover, with the declaration, “So much for the way we read,” immediately opens up a temporal ambiguity: the past and present forms of “to read” are identical on the page. What do we hear? If this claim is consistent with the past orientation of the majority of the verbs in the previous paragraph, then this too is past tense, how we used to read, and

the question posed next marks a shift from past to present. If, however, the present tense carries over from the most recent verb use, we understand the sentence as in the present so much for the way currently read. The question “What about ‘now?’” becomes more of a spatial shift, to gloss the next term in the title, just as “read” had been plumbed.

This is how a text unmakes itself, at its surface. One does not need a suspicion of hidden meaning, secretly intending something latently opposite of what was stated manifestly. Both meanings are manifest, if differently so. This difference is not the triumph of the undecidability of language, however. The paragraph responding to the question, “What about ‘now?’” elucidates some of the stakes for how we used to read and why: that ideological critique aimed to reveal the nefarious workings of domination against political progress (whether via opposition or negotiation), or that the demystifying power of literature or literary criticism could serve the aims of liberation from oppression. The paragraph contends, moreover, that literary studies cannot be equated with political activism. But their reason why is interesting: “Eight years of the Bush regime may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading, and they may also have inspired us to imagine that alongside nascent fascism there might be better ways of thinking and being simply there for the taking” (2). (Ellen Rooney astutely points out what seems evident, such as the Abu Ghraib photographs Best and Marcus cite as evidence, is not so obvious, given Bush’s reelection by some three million votes [139].) In short, Best and Marcus seek to recognize how power also operates unveiled, manifestly, at the surface, and so might our interpretive strategies. Best and Marcus turn to what I would call the “unmaking” of interpretation to make their case for surface reading: they chart a series of practices, incidents, and position themselves descriptively towards those objects of analysis. As I read their unmaking, it works in a number of different ways in a short span of their essay. I suggest that unmaking—here the result of a proliferation of surface reading practices—is one of the ways of thinking that might be “there for the taking,” although intriguingly, no one in this issue took (to) it.

Because I have a certain ambivalence about this notion of “there for the taking” on the surface of the text, I shift my account of what my reading does to the term “unmaking” rather than surface reading, even though they share a lot of features. Importantly, “unmaking” is what enables access to what I am calling aesthetic ontology. By this I mean that unmaking is a practice of reading that returns us to the experience of the text, reflecting

on the reading as we are reading, which quite often entails a burgeoning of meanings to consider. Unmaking puts us in a different power relation to the text: as a collaborator, a friend, a colleague rather than something over which we have power or mastery. A text has its own reticences as well as its own manifestations. Thus, the materiality of the text as an ordered form—that is, there is an order to the presentation of the text’s agenda, an order that can be located in time and space as either on the page or on the screen in the case of film, video, or web-based texts, an order that may or may not be linear—is crucial, and the accuracy of reading requires that we respect that material ordering. Yet I also believe equally passionately in the inherent interpretability of any text; that is to say that the most “self-evident” claim is always already an interpretation, and there is no preinterpretive moment to which we might appeal to adjudicate meaning. An unmaking allows us to open out readings that are there in the form and on the page, embedded in the text’s indeterminacy. While the inherent interpretability of a text does not mean that there are no wrong readings—there certainly are inaccurate, imprecise, and willful or unsupportable readings—it does mean that no single reading has the corner on correctness. Just as Nietzsche speaks of truth as metaphors that we have forgotten are metaphors, so too are statements of “the obvious” no longer recognized as interpretations. Unmaking a text opens out vectors for relating to the sensory, imaginative, and understandable aspects of the text. It may be a queer way of reading—being distracted by the sensory appeal of language, for instance, or patterning that is ordinarily subordinate to linear syntax’s conveyance of information and a logical arc’s persuasive power. It is certainly a more oblique, and slower, approach to the text insofar as it deprives the efficacy of communication for the pleasures of style.

Best and Marcus’s introduction to the surface-reading issue in fact lays out a whole range of interpretations of how we are reading the surfaces of texts now. They link several of these ways to prior, similar turns against the “subtle ingenuity” of suspicious reading that requires heroic mastery to interpret, figured by the Marxist or Freudian critic.⁹ In particular they cite Susan Sontag’s polemic against interpretation, a view which has influenced my own stance towards Stein’s text, insofar as Sontag condemns interpretation for how it “takes the sensory experience of the work of art

9. I note here that Armstrong, too, posits her notion of aesthetic against the hermeneutic of suspicion in her first chapter. I find Armstrong’s approach more generative than Best and Marcus’s, fascinating as its slippages are.

for granted, and proceeds from there” (13). Like surface readers, Sontag criticizes the modern mode of interpretation, characterizing it as “open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances,” a practice which “excavates, and as it excavates it destroys” (6). Instead, she advocates for what I would argue is a more Steinian and antimimetic mode of criticism: “Show *how it is what it is, even that it is what it is*” (14). Advocating critical practices, “which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (13), Sontag ends with a call for supplanting hermeneutics with an erotics of art (14). Sontag’s mode of surface reading is just one of a number of approaches that Best and Marcus catalog, but I single it out because of compatibility with Stein.

Sontag’s aim to make the work of art more real to us is very resonant with what I see as Stein’s own orientation to empiricism, and while Sontag does not elaborate on her choice of “erotic,” her move implies a sensual, relational, even personal or possibly unrational approach to art. I turn to the aesthetic instead of the erotic because I want to foreground the collective approach to the object; aesthetic relations facilitate our consensus with others as well as our nondominating, friendly, imaginative, curious, experiential relation to the object. The commitment to experience rather than realism undergirds both Sontag’s and Stein’s skepticism towards mimesis, even as they espouse an art that is more real, and to me that realness requires an acknowledgment of others.¹⁰

A critic does not have to be suspicious to realize that the surface is corrugated. Unmaking might be understood, perhaps, as an arrested symptomatic reading—taking the tools of close textual analysis seriously as productive without the end of exerting mastery over the text by digging out its secrets. In this, it draws on the modes of surface reading that Best and Marcus describe as those that attend to the “intricate verbal structure of literary language” (10) as well as the “patterns that exist within and across texts” (11). On a different tack, two other approaches that they advocate, literal reading and a process of critical description which serves “to indicate what the text says about itself” (12), may not necessarily move towards unmaking. While they express concern that the latter two might be a “tacit endorsement of the status quo,” (13), a replacement of heroism for

10. Stein on narration: “[H]uman beings are interested in two things. They are interested in the reality and interested in telling about it. I had struggled up to that time with the creation of reality, and then I became interested in how you could tell this thing in a way that anybody could understand and at the same time keep true to your values” (“Transatlantic” 504-05).

quiescence, these first two practices lead Best and Marcus to acknowledge that the difficulty of surface reading is that critics “find themselves unable to sustain the slow pace, receptiveness, and fixed attention it requires” (18). My attempt at unmaking *The Making of Americans* makes this effort, as I try to read the novel at the pace and with the attentiveness that it tutors me to. Unlike surface reading or heroic reading, unmaking is a shared endeavor with the text.

A more oblique definition of close reading might be found in Ellen Rooney’s Althusserian account of reading in “Live Free or Describe,” which pointedly takes on Best and Marcus’s slick surfaces. Although she never uses the term “close reading,” Rooney does extensively discuss its doppelganger, “symptomatic reading,” a kind of reading she finds in Althusser, whose features she enumerates thus: reading is a productive encounter that is “never a matter of uncovering a depth”; that it “abandons the alibi of innocent description of what is ‘given’ before its eyes”; that it “produces no subject effect” but rather “traces the effects of the problematic” (129). Rooney’s apprehension of symptomatic reading is, importantly, not suspicious or even—despite emerging from Althusser—ideologically oriented to shed the scales from our eyes. Her “symptomatic reading” seems to have little in common with the trespasses charged against it by Best and Marcus (who of course draw more widely on psychoanalysis and Marxism, not just on Althusser).

As important as the account she gives of Althusser’s symptomatic reading, which circles insistently around his question “*What is it to read?*” is the way Rooney demonstrates the impossibility of description as a critical method through her deft parsing of the failure of Best and Marcus, as critics of the symptomatic-reading model to adequately describe Althusser’s account of that very practice. Their description “leaves wholly undescribed the most characteristic elements of Althusser’s account of symptomatic reading. Indeed, it passes over in silence those very elements most relevant to the way we read now,” Rooney observes, echoing the editors’ title. Ultimately, if I may lapse into describing Rooney’s argument myself, description cannot get beyond form. Althusser is useful, in Rooney’s view, because “he is a theorist who recognizes that the problem of reading entails a problem of form. Form as a productive consequence of reading disrupts the distinction between description and analysis, reading and writing, inside and outside, surface and depth; it generates a disorienting doubleness of meaning *on a single plane*, the ‘substitution’ that is the play on words” (132). This generative view of reading resonates with the commitment to experience that Armstrong’s radical aesthetics proffers from a quite different direction.

It recasts reading as an ongoing practice engaged in discovering patterns, coalescing motifs, and giving shape to a text.

Rooney's returning us to form calls attention not just to how close reading must happen over and over again, in that dynamic and constant recalibration that Gallop's acoustic definition elicits, but to how the transposition of reading, which is inevitable since we can never step into the same reading twice, is made possible by form. Form, "situational, transitive, ultimately incomplete," is what carries a reading from one terrain to another (133). "Our attentiveness to the text's own words is unfailing," Rooney writes. "But when we observe that 'its silence is *its own words*' (Althusser, "From *Capital*" 22), we guiltily acknowledge that this silence is never merely described, but a measure of the unavoidable break that is reading's encounter with form" (133). Through form texts enter into dynamic relations that make possible an aesthetic ontology.

Rooney's critique of the evidentiary power of description is particularly germane for *The Making of Americans*, because description is precisely what's at stake for so much of the novel. What makes it "difficult" to read, once you settle into its rhythms, is that the role of event has been eclipsed in the narrative. Sure, stuff happens—primarily, families are formed and reformed through immigration, marriages, births, and deaths. But those events are not the concern of the narrator, even as she traces their effects. We don't see, for instance, the wedding of Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning although we see its lead-in and aftermath. The bulk of the description activity is a cataloguing of kinds, via exemplars whom it is difficult to discern, whose referent is not located especially in diegetic space and time, who are excised and pinned like the butterfly/moth of a certain anecdote. These specimens can be tracked by number and qualities but not by proper name (e.g., this third one of this kind was more like this . . .). But since we cannot readily visualize these exemplars nor have any other description to compare with them, we cannot evaluate or recognize, say, this one who is like a cannonball on cotton, should we run into that one again in the story.

If Althusser asks "*What is it to read?*" Rooney reiterates and reworks Althusser's question in her critique of Best and Marcus's formulation of surface reading. So in that vein, this book is another attempt to assert the question "What is it to read?"—only here there is an object to be read. The question "What is it to read?" in other words, can be glossed, misread, torqued to put in question not just or not so much the meaning of the *action* of reading, but also the ontological question of the *text*: what is *it* to read, that we must read, that is there to be read?

There have been, of course, quite a number of excellent readings of this book in the past several decades. Yet in developing this practice of unmaking the text, my readings of Stein's novel work against the grain of past critical treatments of Stein. Whether because Stein's writing seems particularly to limn the boundary between art and life (exemplified by her bestseller, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which for many has been the entry point to reading Stein), or because the difficulty of reading Stein's texts tempts one to displace textual explication in favor of the—admittedly compelling—life story of the author, a number of the critical readings of Stein's work tend to take on a biographical cast, even well after the texts of other authors have been granted autonomy from authorial intention and biographical criticism.¹¹ Developing a critical reading of *The Making of Americans* especially risks this temptation, not only because it is a difficult novel but because it is one that seems quite plausible to read as thinly veiled autobiography. Moreover, the narrator clearly struggles at moments with the effort of telling her story; that trajectory between despair and confidence also seems to track with how Stein herself carves out her sense of herself as a writer, or even as a genius, through writing this novel. Indeed, one of the most compelling readings of the novel, Lisa Ruddick's chapter in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, closely links Stein's body and life experience with the body and life experience of the narrator.¹² Despite this beguiling proximity of text and life, however, I eschew the biographical in favor of the theoretical, and I focus on reading this compelling novel for what it is doing narratively, formally, aesthetically, and conceptually alongside other philosophical texts.¹³

11. Boyd and Kirsch's recent collection offers a strong counter to this impulse, insistently turning us to the text.

12. Watten also argues that the antipatriarchal stance of the book charts Stein's break with her brother Leo.

13. Clement has labeled a certain convergence of readings that eschew the biographical as "postmodern," suggesting that they all "contend that Gertrude Stein's 900-page novel deconstructs the role narrative plays in constituting identity by employing an indeterminacy that challenges readerly subjectivity." She goes on to say that such critics "agree that the reader's usual processes of making meaning through narrative are rendered useless while reading *The Making of Americans*." However, she does this to construct a straw figure of *The Making of Americans* read as a postmodernist chaotic text, against which she shows that "it is a mimetic modernist text that has been misread as indeterminate" ("Story" 426), implicitly asserting a righter way of reading the text, a corrective.

If unmaking is a practice of reading that returns us to the experience of the text and its divarications, then the concerns it raises attend to the vectors that organize our experience. It doesn't take a novel as difficult as Stein's to show that "what the text itself is doing" is hardly a simple or straightforward claim. The formally innovative agenda and epistemological drive of Stein's novel give us rich thought experiments for reflecting on time, emotion, consensus, and medium. I begin in the first chapter with the issue of time because reading the novel transforms one's sense and experience of time; it is a novel that does not yield to a linear and habitually practiced reading but one that insists on circling back, beginning again, cycling through. I argue that Stein's queer, nonlinear temporality is uncannily resonant with Heidegger's temporality for Dasein in *Being and Time*. In particular, reading Heidegger through Stein gives us a new vantage on Heidegger's claim that human being is always being-towards-death; this seemingly telic finality is complicated by how Heidegger's model of temporality is as multilayered and nonlinear as Stein's is. And reading Heidegger with Stein reveals that while both ostensibly rely on repetition, in fact the queerly nonlinear time that undergirds their notions of being means there is no repeating.

If time is the first axis of the reader's experience, narrative may be said to be the second, as one crucial way to represent time. To parse this I draw on Gerard Genette's narratology, although the true philosophical interlocutor for this chapter may be said to be the narrator per se. The second chapter thus takes up a close reading of how the story of the narrator's emotional experience emerges and then dissipates in the novel, which serves as a demonstration of a theory of the subject that becomes the subjective universal through depersonalization, as the "I" shifts to "one" or "some." By not letting readers identify with the psychological interiority of characters or project themselves into the diegetic scene of the story, the novel effectively exteriorizes readers from the fictional world and reflexively distances us from the reading experience itself. Reading the novel the first time through often has us grasping at the moments when the narrator is most present or seizing narrative episodes as long as short stories or as short as vignettes in order to orient our reading experience. Faced with the flux of narrative levels and themes, which interleaves with description or philosophical rumination, readers often react emotionally. It is in this emotional reaction to the text that its role in aesthetic relation with us first becomes evident. We become highly aware of ourselves as readers, reading—or even, at times, as readers unable to read, thwarted by our own

habits of reading. This very different demand on our protocols of reading engenders a range of emotions in readers and leads me to consider both how emotion operates in the novel and how the theories of emotion intersect with the novel's philosophical activity. The second chapter is distinct from all the other chapters in that it is the one singularly oriented toward the sustained close reading of Stein, or in other words, committed to the unmaking of the text. The aim to encompass something of the extent of the narrator's process makes this the longest chapter of the book.

The third chapter turns directly to the question of emotion, bringing in recent emotion theory from philosophy, literary theory, and neuroscience (Wollheim, Altieri, and Damasio, respectively) to probe the novel's insights on the intersection of narrative and emotion, our desire for narrative to be emotionally evocative, and our tendency to encase emotion in story as a way to apprehend what we are feeling. This chapter questions the role of and need for narrative as paradigm to account for how emotion takes place: Stein's novel more so than the theory seems able to question and even dispense with narrative as a framework for apprehending emotion. Drawing from Altieri's useful parsing out of different kinds of affect, this chapter moves to focus on emotion and on the remarkable observation of the intransigence of narrative models as a way of explaining emotion's function. To conclude, the chapter turns to the question of mood and lyric, examining whether in fact this novel is a lyric novel and how it negotiates or even refuses the lyric.

The novel's queer production of feelings paradoxically challenges us both to reach for and to question consensus on what a passage means, what the novel is about, and what the experience of the novel is as we grapple with thinking and feeling in relation to the book. So my fourth chapter explores the aesthetic force of the novel as an effort to "write for myself and strangers," reading this famous phrase from the novel in relation to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*—specifically his notion of *sensus communis* and his insistence that aesthetic judgment entails a subjectively universal resolution of imagination and understanding. Kant's notion of *sensus communis* is notable for how it, like Stein's novel, deploys a movement from first person to third. I argue that reading Stein with Kant presents us with aesthetic judgment as a temporal process, one that must take time to acquire knowledge but then at the end of that interval one "had it completely at one time," as Stein says about her book (*Look* 89). How can we square these two different temporalities? Through narration, since as Stein notes, "The essence of narration is this problem of time"; in writing "There should not

be a sense of time, but an existence suspended in time” (“Transatlantic” 506). The time is entirely of the work, not of the creating of the work. Time is the medium of Stein’s novel, which brings it closer to the innovations of midcentury visual artworks.

Thus, finally, to develop the reading of *sensus communis* and aesthetic judgment as a process queered by Stein’s time (as dilatory, digressive, durational), I turn in the fifth chapter to Henri Matisse’s cut-outs and Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the time-image. On the one hand, the turn to thinking visual arts in relation to Stein’s novel picks up on Kant’s aesthetics being developed in relation to visual art and the visual appeal of nature. But on the other hand, in what might be understood as a more formal or conceptual mode, the discontinuities Stein crafts in her novel are akin to Deleuze’s Kantian-derived idea of the time-image in cinema—an image that is likewise based on discontinuity of experience, as well as a nonlinear, duration-oriented temporality. If, as Catherine Gallagher has observed, that “form and time are opposed, almost goes without saying” (231), in thinking time through Deleuze, form comes to the fore, albeit not as opposed to time but as time’s material. The novel plays with the interstices of form, cutting in, interrupting, piecing, juxtaposing material, and playing with the levels of discourse through its performative turn towards the telling of the story. The novel’s aesthetic *modus operandi* works the relations among paragraphs as a fundamental unit for constructing the novel and develops within verbal art a kind of cinematic thinking. This kind of thinking is, I argue, also at work in Matisse’s cut-outs, which may be said to do to space what the Deleuze’s cinematic figure does to time. Deleuze’s time-image enables us to see a different way that Stein’s novel is cinematic—not in any literal or thematic sense (Stein’s famous repetition as akin to the film strip’s iterations of still images to create the illusion of movement) but in how the novel offers a mode of thinking that is both durational and an immediate, now-oriented, sustained present. Reading the time-image in Stein with Matisse gives us new insight into the ways stillness and collage operate in narrative and the power of form to make pieces and patterns whole within time.

What’s at stake overall is the urgency of reading Stein’s novel now, a novel which has come to be peculiarly legible with the advent of critical theory—in particular poststructuralist theories of the sign and the subject, which have generated many of the above debates about affect, reading, form, time, and narrative. The relative critical silence on this key novel in Stein’s oeuvre, however, is stunning: only *one* other book-length treatment