Two derriere-garde approaches to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*
by Gary Heidt

Abstract: A one-liberating hypothesis about Getrude Stein's Tender Buttons may be reifying into stultifying institutional dogma. In response, author calls for disruptive critical play, and demonstrates the application of forbidden exigetical keys to Tender Buttons.

Introduction

Current institutional dogma holds that Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* should be read as wordplay, an aural score; to look for meaning in it is to miss the point entirely. The author's research shows that 100% of currently employed university pedagogues (s=2) teach that, in *Tender Buttons*, Stein uses words primarily as sound-objects, and anyone who looks for meaning is not only unsophisticated, but possibly reactionary, mentally feeble and boring.

There is a lot to be said for this "sound-only" approach to *Tender Buttons*. *Tender Buttons* is deeply musical. A focus on sound can't fail to be a rewarding approach to Stein's most popular poem. Reading *Tender Buttons* aloud rather than talking about it is excellent approach to take in the classroom.

In "Professing Stein/Stein Professing" Charles Bernstein articulates the position that *Tender Buttons* should be read for "the pleasure/plentitude in the immersion in language[1], where language is not understood as a code for something else or a representation of somewhere else."

This author cannot help but cry out, "Cow!--Stein is not crippling the language but opening up the bellows to work all the registers." She believed that it was impossible to remove meaning from writing, and this author believes it is impossible to remove meaning from reading. Not only impossible-- but boring and possibly Puritanical! Repressing of the meaning-layer in *Tender Buttons* is less fun than wallowing in the multiplicity of inadequate, dangerous and sleazy meanings that spew out of *Tender Buttons* when it is read as a code. Bernstein's liberating insight is in danger of becoming a prohibitive institutional dogma[2].

However, both the Bernstein insight and any premature foreclosure on "what *Tender Buttons* means" may be saved from uncomfortable and embarrasing reification. Bernstein may be overcorrecting for the excesses of a hermeneutic tradtion in which critics apply various "keys" to *Tender Buttons*, often with a whiff of Theosophy. Key-brandishing critics can interpret *Tender Buttons* in ways that diminish the majesty of the text. Their exegeses seem too narrow. The suggestion that *Tender Buttons* is a coded text makes it seem less grand and more hokey, like a "Fun with Words" exercise. Nevertheless, these scholars do deliver, from time to time, very intriguing openings into the text.

One such exegesis is Allegra Stewart's *Gertrude Stein and the Present*, in which a very sensitive

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1   How I would love to someday hear the eloquent Professor Bernstein read *Tender Buttons* aloud!
2   Bernstein introduces his insight with an anecdote in which Foucault (author of the three-volume *History of Sexuality*) says that it boring to discuss sex.

reading of the text segues into an entymological rapture on the Persian root GHAR. The peripatetic root GHAR has sown such seed in its peregrinations as to have progeny in many language families. These cousins include the "carafe" at the beginning of *Tender Buttons*; other words in *Tender Buttons* with this root include curtain, glass, glaze, gloom, glide, glitter, glisten, gratis, gratitude, grace, green, grass, yellow; some other GHAR-spawn not in *Tender Buttons* are chior, chord, chorus, Christ, chrysalis, glare, glow, glimmer, gratis, grow, hand, heir, nightingale, thermos, thermometer, yearn, yolk, year and haruspex (priestly inspector of entrails.)

"As a result the form GHAR... becomes in 'Objects' the verbal equivalent of light and thus, by analogy, of conscious perception of the external world." Stewart claims that the structure of 'Objects'--the first section of *Tender Buttons*--is based on the anatomy of the human eye; having found evidence that one piece represents the cornea, another the fovea, a third the ciliary muscle, and so forth.

Lisa Ruddick's *Reading Gertrude Stein: Text, Body, Gnosis* makes the argument that a human sacrifice is taking place in *Tender Buttons*. 'Objects' ends with a poem which reads as an urgent prayer uttered or thought by something which is being eaten, that is, being made into a special kind of object, that is, a food object. (Being eaten--what a radical challenge to subjectivity!)

> THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER
> Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers. ...

This poem, placed at the end of 'Objects,' comes right before the next section, which is called 'Food,' and clearly marks a transition between the phenomenelogical state of objecthood– which can include food objects or even, although we may lament it, people– to food specifically, that is, objects that one makes into part of oneself. Ruddick's claim that some kind of ritual cannibalism is going on here is substantiated by other passages in the text as well.

While Stewart's entymological/optical key and Ruddick's ritual sacrifice key require a bit of effort to turn, all students of Stein might agree is that *Tender Buttons* is quite easily and enjoyably read as minimally veiled lesbian erotic poetry. In this code, "cow" means orgasm, a meaning which enlivens, in my opinion, passages such as "I hope she has her cow."

Institutional academics and poets vehemently object to such hermeneutic approaches. None of them are big enough to contain *Tender Buttons*; but even the urge to "explain" is a sign that a critic is hopelessly out to lunch. I want to suggest that one of the great things about *Tender Buttons* is the way that Stein always avoids closing meaning, but instead always leaves the sentences opened up, words vibrating.

Does finding one meaning mean we have to throw out all the others? Part of what has been so fascinating about *Tender Buttons* over the years is that almost any key that is brought to bear upon it yields something interesting. It brings to mind the message from space described in Stanislaw Lem's novel *His Master's Voice*.

Rather than avoid keys, why not collect them? Let's approach *Tender Buttons* not with an ascetic

prescription against reading anything into the text, but revel in our ability to read so many things into it.

As George Clinton says on the album *Funkadelic*, "nothing is good unless you play with it." The old "new criticism" felt it necessary to kill the author in order to be free to have fun with the texts. I suggest we take it even further! With a properly derriere-garde attitude, we can not only kill the author, but simultaneously eat and worship her.

Yes, you can have your GHAR and eat it too. In this spirit, I will provide a brief sketch of two derriere-garde approaches to *Tender Buttons* which I hope will edify almost as much as they stupefy.

The Oulipo Key of McIlroy[3]

A word square is a matrix of letters which reads across and down. Ancient word squares found in Pompeii are thought to be magic, but it is not mutually exclusive to suggest that people may thought they were fun or fascinating. Wordsquares became very popular in the nineteenth century in the United States. Clubs and individual "Formists" would construct "forms" (mostly squares) and send them in to the "Puzzle Pages" of newspapers. Soon the forms were left blank and clues were given so that readers could participate– paving the way for the crossword puzzle.

For every given set of words (cf. a text) there is a finite number of wordsquares that can be made from that set. Using a computer and a special program written by my colleague John Cerkan, I can find all of the wordsquares implicit in a given text.

No squares larger than 5x5 could be constructed from whole words in Tender Buttons. Only two 5x5 wordsquares can be extracted, and they are as follows:

c u r v e u n i o n r i g i d v o i c e e n d e d	g r a s s r e l e t a l o n e s e n s e s t e e l

Both of these read the same across or down; i.e., they are symmetrical. Symmetrical squares are far more common than asymmetrical squares.

About 300 symmetrical 3x3 wordsquares and about 400 4x4 symmetrical wordsquares can be constructed from the words that make up *Tender Buttons*. Personally, I find the asymmetrical

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3 Doug McIlroy was a key figure in the development of Unix at Bell Labs and a recreational linguist. I name this key after him in honor of his elegant code for producing wordsquares from a given set of words.

ones more intriguing; it's like two poems in one; the second poem a secret that needs a change of orientation to reveal.

Below is the set of all asymmetrical 4x4 wordsquares from *Tender Buttons*. One possible way to apply the Oulipo McIlroy Key: cut these little squares out and arrange them in a composition of your choosing. It will explain *Tender Buttons*!

bare	cape	lean	seam
away	away	ease	ease
late	sale	asia	asia
eyes	eyes	dear	lean

bone	gate	lean	seam
open	away	else	else
reed	make	asia	asia
ends	eyes	dear	lean

bone	lamb	none	sore
oxen	asia	open	open
reed	milk	seed	lead
ends	bale	ends	ends

cage	lamb	none	sore
away	asia	oxen	oxen
name	milk	seed	lead
eyes	pale	ends	ends

cage	lamb	page	uses
away	asia	away	sale
rate	mill	late	else
eyes	pale	eyes	stem

cage	lamb	sale
away	asia	away
same	silk	face
eyes	take	eyes

cane	lace	same
away	away	away
same	take	lake
eyes	eyes	eyes

The Kabalah Key

"Faced with the sound, the materiality, or the presence (present) of language as music of sense in our ears, we project a secret: a hidden language. It's no coincidence that the projection of 'the hidden language of the Jews' is the ghost that haunts the production and reception of Jewish literature..." Charles Bernstein, Professing Stein

Kabbalah, or Qbala, or Cabbalah, is a tradition of Jewish origin, which has long fascinated non-Jews including Popes and satanists. Kabalah involves, among many beliefs and practices of which I have extremely limited understanding, a form of textual analysis.

Because both the text and the language in which it was written were products of a Divine intelligence, they believed, the Torah stored everything within its words, and various keys could unlock different dimensions of the text. One of these keys was gematria, in which the Hebrew letters are read as numbers and words as sums. Gematria, used to produce mystically edifying commentaries on sacred texts, is a code.

Bernstein's quote above was meant to caution one against an unconcious tendency to look for a 'secret language of the Jews' in Stein's writing. So how about doing it consciously? The author set about to analyze the text Kabalistically, and the results were intriguing.

English letters, unlike Hebrew letters, do not have numerical values (except in special cases, like hexadecimal numbers) so the author assigned a range of counting numbers to the alphabet with A=1 and Z=26. It is apparently gematrically accepted that numbers that differ by 1 are considered to be "close enough" to being equivalent.

The results are inconclusive, but more funding is needed to follow up on some suggestive findings. Please send checks to The Perceiver of Sound League.

One of the first things this author noticed was the connection between the title and the couple whose love suffuses the text:

Tender (66) = Stein (67)
Buttons (110) = Alice B Toklas (111)

Sugar (66) = Tender (66)

It is pretty rare for any two lines to have the same value, but in the "Sugar" section of 'Food' there are two lines with the value 614. The two lines are separated; there are three lines between them.

The first 614 line says

      The line which sets sprinkling to be a remedy is beside the best cold.

The second of the two 614 lines includes the phrase "A search inbetween." If one searches

inbetween the two 614 lines, one finds phrases such as "A puzzle, a monster puzzle" as well as a "wet crossing," which could certainly set some sprinkling.

Can this be read this as an invitation to further gematrical research?

The remaining line is a list of numbers written out as words:

One, two and one, two, nine, second and five and that.

It's all suggestive of some sort of a code. If Stein is not using a code, she is at least playing with the idea of codes.

Also in "Sugar"– (which–is this cheating?–reads as an ode to masturbation with the lesbian erotica key)– is the line

A piece of separate outstanding rushing is so blind with open delicacy

which equals 660-- the exact amount, in dollars, Stein paid to have *Three Lives*, her previous book, published.

While these findings are suggestive, this is not the only way to turn *Tender Buttons* into numbers. The one-to-one mapping of letter and number is appealingly simple, like Bauhaus design, but the old Kabbalists didn't do it that way. In Hebrew, *aleph* through the tenth letter, *yud*, increase by ones, but yud through kuf increase by tens, so that *mem*, the thirteenth letter, equals forty. From *kuf* through *tav*, the twenty-second and last letter, they increase by hundreds, with *tav* valued at four hundred. I applied a similar system to the English alphabet and ended up with Z as 800.

Armed with my new system, I applied it to the first piece in *Tender Buttons*:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS. (954)
A kind in glass and a cousin, (959) a spectacle and nothing strange (1210), a single hurt color and an arrangement (1688) in a system to pointing (1920) All this and not ordinary (1747) not unordered in not resembling (1621) The difference is spreading. (841)

These numbers, if read as dates Anno Domini, form a mini-thesis on the English language in parabolic shape, shooting into the future and then back into the past:

954- Alred becomes its first king of England
959- King Edgar unifies England
1210- King John invades Ireland
1688- The Glorious Revolution
1920- (this date lay in the future for Stein, who wrote *Tender Buttons* in 1912: suitably, it is the birth year of Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and Frank Herbert.)
1747- Samuel Johnson begins work on his *Dictionary*
1621- First treaty between English colonists and Native Americans
841- Founding of Dublin

The only important thing that's missing is Ebonics.

Other Keys

The anarchist key-- "Act so there is no use in a center," the opening line of Rooms, could be an anarchist statement of dogma.

The St. Teresa of Avila key- "I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle... in which there are many ROOMS." (from *Interior Castle*--emphasis mine.) Stein wrote much of *Tender Buttons* in Avila, and was a great fan of St. Teresa.

The Taoist key-- Compare and contrast: "The way spawned one. One spawned Two. Two spawned Three. Three spawned the Myriad things" and "One, two and one, two, nine, second and five and that." Or: "The way that can be named is not the true way" and "A bent way that is a way to declare that the best is all together, a bent way shows no result."

The 420 Key-- "with burning there is that pleasant state of stupefaction," (Rooms)

The Medical Key-- Stein was a medical school dropout; Allegra Stewart contends that the fifty-two pieces in Objects correspond to the fifty-two parts of the eye. "There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine." *Tender Buttons*, 'Objects,' "Glazed Glitter"

The Phenomenology Key-- *Tender Buttons* may have been phenomenologically reduced. POP QUIZ: "It helps to say that where localization is given it is nothing so little as it is extension." Stein or Husserl?

      The list could be extended arbitrarily; and if, dear reader, you should come up with your own key, good, bad or funky, please let me know!

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