Book Review

Ulla Haselstein. *Gertrude Steins literarische Porträts*. Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2019. 368 pp., 4 Fig. Hb. € 34.00. ISBN 978-3-8353-9119-2.

Reviewed by **Dr. Sofie Behluli**, Department of English, University of Bern, Unitobler Länggassstr. 49, CH - 3012 Bern, Switzerland, E-mail: sofie.behluli@unibe.ch

https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2022-2079

A stone is a stone is a stone is a stone. Making the stone stony. Stein and Haselstein. Ulla Haselstein's book *Gertrude Steins literarische Porträts* (2019) offers a compelling new look into the life of the iconic modernist author and a careful analysis of the historical, psychological, and grammatical underpinnings of her literary portraiture. In this book, the American *émigré* Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) appears as the hostess of the famous artists' salon on 27 rue de Fleurus; as a diligent observer of human individuality whose writing is profoundly shaped by her own studies in perception, attention, and habituation; and as an experimental genius who was often overshadowed by her male peers at the time. Stein's modernist texts are incredibly challenging and often viewed as illegible products of elitism, but Ulla Haselstein's meticulous analysis makes them accessible and fun to revisit. Indeed, this book distills over twenty essays and articles that Haselstein has published over the last two decades, which explains her deep understanding of Stein's writing and her expertise in the field.

Written in German and published in 2019 with Konstanz University Press, this book focuses on the literary portraits across Stein's expansive oeuvre. Ulla Haselstein is interested in reading Stein's word portraits through a biographical lens and, moreover, in exploring their role as nodal points where singularity and typology, individualism and national identity, and auto/biography and historiography intersect. Haselstein's attention to formal details such as lexical restriction, serial reproduction, rhythmical composition, and grammatical permutation reveal the cognitive and affective aspects of the formation processes of Stein's texts. Similar to Andy Warhol, who would later create standardized serial portraits with minute deviations in search of the subject's 'essence,' Gertrude Stein uses a linguistic form of mechanical seriality to capture the singularity of the individual rather than a generic character type. By embedding her microstructural analyses of Stein's literary portraits within a wide interdisciplinary network that ranges from literature (Flaubert, James, Defoe) to art (Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso) to psychology (Freud, Hugo Münsterberg, William James), Haselstein also highlights the importance of Stein as a descendant of nineteenth-century intellectuals and a forerunner of important twentieth and twenty-first-century developments. Thus,

source: https://doi.org/10.48350/177310 | downloaded: 12.10.2024

Haselstein's examination of Gertrude Stein's literary portraits also engenders a nuanced portrait of the writer herself.

Gertrude Steins literarische Porträts is divided into six chapters that illustrate how Stein uses the full potential of the deceivingly simple 'portrait' to soften generic, medial, and intersubjective borders. Chapter 1 examines Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) and how this portrait triptych of three lower-class American women was inspired by Paul Cézanne's *Madame Cézanne à l'éventail* (1878 and 1886–1888; one of four reproductions in the book) and Gustave Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877). The medial and linguistic alterity, respectively, of Cézanne's painting and Flaubert's collection, stimulated Stein to think more deeply about the sound shapes and grammatical structures of her own work (18). Chapters 2 and 3 complement each other by examining Stein's novel *The Making of Americans* (1925), which Stein herself viewed as "the beginning, really the beginning of modern writing" (qtd. in Haselstein 55). The former chapter discusses the broad historical context of modernity, American identity, Stein's experience of exile in Paris, and the conflicting concepts of standardization and singularity, whereas the latter chapter offers a detailed analysis of the three American generations in Stein's book through the lens of serialization. These two chapters demonstrate how Stein, an alienated American living in Europe, harvested her own family history as a template to work out the processes of Americanization through observation, introspection, and serial portraiture.

Chapter 4 – the book's eponymous and core chapter – is particularly compelling as it offers a closer study of Stein's medial and aesthetic reflections. The modernist author was at pains to capture singularity in her literary portraits, not typology. Stein was keen to overcome the consecutive and lengthy linearity of language because it inevitably produces representatives of character types rather than singular individuals. She tried to solve this problem by playing with the principles of serialization and grammatical modulation and moved through five different stages of literary portraiture, which Haselstein explores at length. In chapter 4, which is mostly dedicated to the analysis of Stein's reciprocal portraits of and with painters, one can find two brilliant subchapters on "Stein und Zeit" and "Literarisches Porträt und Anekdote." These are some of the most theoretical sections of Haselstein's book and, offering valuable insights into intermediality, will interest Stein specialists and non-specialists alike.

Chapter 5 continues these medial contemplations by examining Stein's 'thing portraits' in *Tender Buttons* (1914), which blend portraits with still lifes. Haselstein's attention to Stein's intricate language experiments – syntactical and grammatical deviations, lexical restrictions, alliterations, repetitions, permutations, suggestions, double entendres, intertextual references, collage-like composition, and so on – pays off particularly well in this chapter. Anticipating Viktor Shklovsky's modernist

technique of defamiliarization – which desires to make the stone 'stony' – Stein's *Tender Buttons* interrupts habitual perceptive patterns to uncover the connections between language, consciousness, and social structures.

Chapter 6, "Selbstporträts eines Genies," focuses on two of Stein's best-known texts, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937). In this final chapter, Haselstein balances her own research into Stein's life with the author's self-fashioning as a genius and returns to questions of celebrity, gender, and art. Her analysis of Stein's mock-autobiographies positions them as forerunners of the now popular genre called 'autofiction' and foregrounds their pioneering function as generic *trompe l'oeils* that challenge the borders between historiography, memoir, anecdote, autobiography, and novel (Haselstein 311). Once again Haselstein shows how Stein's experimentations interrogate the nature of identity, the relation "von Standardisierung und Singularität, von Konformität und Abweichung" (313). The concise coda at the end of the book underlines Stein's goal to capture emotional complexity and nuance in her literary portraits. According to Haselstein, the modernist author accomplishes these aesthetic ambitions through language games which demand the reader attend to each text's singularity. Stein's literary portraits are not just portraits of individuals; they are also portraits of the singularity of literature itself.

I would like to close this brief review by criticizing aspects of *Gertrude Steins literarische Porträts*, but it is difficult to find faults with this brilliant book. It is evident from each and every page that a true specialist is speaking here; someone who has carefully developed her thoughts on Gertrude Stein over many years. One can only hope that this book will be translated into English soon, so it can reach a broader readership beyond the limited German-speaking world.