

Picasso

G.Stein

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Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso are intimately related to each other, or at least so Stein would probably want to think. In fact I suspect that she considers herself to have been championing Picasso from the start and being instrumental in the world at large discovering his genius. If so the present book, slight in extension, in fact it cannot be thought of anything but an extended essay, ought to be crucial in the history of modern art. It is graced on the cover by Picasso's portrait of Stein back in 1906, and it is amply illustrated by black and white reproductions of Picasso's work, without ever attempting to delve into any one. Stein is no art critic, she probably lacks the required erudition, not to mention the necessart vocabulary or any intimate experience with the craft itself; thus she is reduced to that of the abstract intellectual inventing her own language as she proceeds. The point of her exercise is to announce to the world that Picasso is a genius. It makes sense to place this in time, although the Dover edition I read, criminally does not give any indication when the book was published; from reading it I conclude that it must have been written from the vantage point of 1938/39.

First Stein develops a peculiar language, an awkward and primitive one, that cannot be characterized as anything but studied affectation. True, sometimes I am reminded of D.H.Lawrence in her repetitious use of banalities, but while Lawrence writes seductively speaking to your blood if to nothing else, Stein speaks to nobody except possibly herself. The idea, somewhat ironically, is of course to enhance the profundity of her ideas by appealing to the sincerity we associate with the primitive and simple expression. Examples are legion and can be produced through random scanning. *Again and again he did not recommence but continued after an interruption. This is his life'. or During the second rose period there was almost no cubism but there was painting which was writing which had to do with the Spanish character, that is to say the Saracen character and this commenced to develop very much. I will explain.* Examples like that can be seen several on the page, those two being indeed selected by random. They might have an exasperated charm when first encountered, but they do not stick in your mind, they are not robust enough to survive in memory.

What are her ideas? There is one central idea, namely that we normally see not what we see but what we expect to see. Seeing is a reconstruction. Picasso on the other hand reported exactly what he saw, without the hindsight of knowledge. It was a matter of raw and immediate perception. This is interesting, and much of it is of course true. We see not what we really see but what we reconstruct. This is a fundamental fact of cognitive perception, the ramifications of which are wide and intricate and which has attracted a lot of scientific research. But is Picasso any different? Does he report accurately of what he sees? Of course not, the constraints under which we mortals live under, also applies to him, as to any other mortal. He may of course be credited with some visual innovations, new ways of seeing, but that is of course true for any major artist. Cubism is of course

what looms very large from the perspective of the 30's. Nowadays it is seen for what it was, a kind of fad. Stein does not even mention Cezanne as a possibly inspiration for cubism, the only inspiration for Picasso she acknowledges is that of Toulouse-Lautrec, which I grant is a perceptive one. Instead she refers to Spanish villages as being cubist, as being in opposition to the surrounding landscape, a kind of defiance. This might be true, or it might be nonsense. Probably both. In fact few things if any that Stein proposes can be falsified, they all make sense, at least some sense, depending on what sense we decide they will be endowed with.

Her repeated references to the Spanish element if of course pure pretentious nonsense if taken literally, if not it provides the poetic and most suggestive part of her exercise. Spain is not really Europe, its landscape is not European. It is an Oriental landscape, one of few if any colors, an abstract landscape if you want. Spain is Oriental without being of the Orient. The Arabic influence is deep, without of course being Arabic. And so on. Thus 20th century of Art is Spanish Art as done by Picasso. Picasso is Spanish, this is something he cannot escape, something which constitute his very identity, although he was close to losing it when he went to Paris for the first time as a youth. France and Italy is something else, they are always seductive, at least to the Spanish spirit. Russia is similar to Spain in so far that it is also not part of Europe but Oriental, Oriental in a different way though than Spain. Spain and America are intimately related (is this why she understands him so well?). This kind of reasoning can be, as noted, quite poetic and sometimes even fascinating, but with Stein, the positive effect is destroyed by too many inanities.

Another possible idea to extract from her word porridge is that of painting being writing. This does have some truth to it when it comes to Picasso I readily accept. Picasso did mostly associate with writers when he came to Paris. But as Stein points out he was not really a writer, or as she puts it. The egotism of a writer is different from the egotism of a painter. The writer puts himself in the center, while the painter makes himself invisible. In other words writing is basically subjective, painting objective? Is this what she is trying to say? To make her claim that Picasso is a writing painter she resorts to calligraphy. Picasso's paintings are like calligraphy. In the Orient calligraphy is an important art, in the West it is marginal, if it even makes sense. But of course Spain is Oriental, hence *ipso facto* Picasso is naturally drawn to calligraphy. A piece of irrefutable logic of which no doubt she was proud. Calligraphy is indeed abstract art, and it its interesting that we nevertheless develop rather consistent notions of its intrinsic beauty, not unlike that of music, which is also very abstract and non-representative. This would be an interesting avenue to explore, but of course Stein does not. Maybe she has not reflected on the issue really?

To be honest, the phenomenon of Picasso is more interesting than the art itself. At least so I think. Picasso as an artist has been obscured by the celebrity status he has been endowed with, in fact he is considered the Einstein of modern art. This status of a celebrity enhanced him and his reputation, but I suspect that it will work against him in the long run, and that already his standing among artists is not as predominant as among the general public and art critics. It is the man, or rather the phenomenon which fascinates. The boundless energy, the natural talent, the unerring self-confidence. His life is in the nature of an eruption, sexual perhaps more than artistic. Stein writes about his

emptying himself, always emptying himself like a vessel in order to make space for new impressions, new initiatives (although apart from his artistic life he showed no power to take initiatives, no desire to make decisions, Stein reports as one of her few concrete tidbits of personal information.) How original is his art really? It is varied and it shows a lot of dynamic energy, but frankly speaking so much of it is really bad. His various colored periods, his harlequins, his big bathing women? This is the stuff of which schlock art is made, crying clowns, sad tight-rope dancers, those kind of images grace many a wall. True you can tell that they are different, they are done by a superior artist, but one which really lacks a vision, who is seduced by his skill, the ease of his execution, the prodigality of his output. One who is rather writing than painting, who puts himself in the center, radiating in every direction. (And of course with such a varied output there is bound to be things that appeal to everyone somewhere, and indeed there are if not paintings at least drawings of Picasso which I admire.)

The phenomenon of Picasso is fascinating as well as slightly repulsive. It is indeed the phenomenon of a boundless egotism and as such invariably charming and seductive. 'So then Picasso has his splendor', those are the last words (except for 'Thank You') of her essay, and I appropriate them as being as appropriate for this one.

Thank you.

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