

Dialogue and the Limits of Narrative Discourse: Gérard Genette, Gertrude Stein

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Abstract

Prose narrative is filled with scenes of character-character dialogue, and yet dialogue has been largely overlooked by narrative theory. Character speech occupies at best a marginal position in classical models of narrative discourse. This article argues that dialogue's minor status presents an opportunity to rethink the ambitions of classical narratology and, therefore, that this 'marginal' discourse belongs to the centre of postclassical thinking. Drawing on Gérard Genette's remarks on direct speech, I argue that dialogue's unique position at the limits of narrative discourse invests the form with anarchic potential. Feminist scholarship on Gertrude Stein has made a similar case for Steinian dialogue as a form of discourse resistive to the demands of patriarchal language. We might therefore find new approaches to Stein and new avenues for narratology by bringing these fields more directly into conversation.

Keywords: *narratology, feminism, Gérard Genette, Gertrude Stein, dialogue, narration, speech, 'Q.E.D.', 'Melanctha'*

In 'Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences', Mark Twain makes fun of the unruly dialogue in *Deerslayer*, outlining a set of standards that Cooper's novel fails to meet. According to Twain, narrative dialogue 'should sound like human talk', with 'a discoverable meaning', and 'a discoverable purpose', it should 'help out the tale, and stop when the people cannot think of anything more to say'.¹ Characters shouldn't be allowed to talk like a book in one scene and a backwoodsman in another. Their speeches need to have a point and arrive there in a timely manner. They should be realistic, useful and efficient; they need to be kept in check. The disciplinary bend of these remarks is suggestive, and dialogue begins to emerge for us as something tending away from these demands. We catch a glimpse of dialogue in the wild as something chaotic, full of unruly impulses, needing a firm hand.

This article seeks to answer the following questions: Why has narrative theory neglected dialogue between characters? And, what happens to our theories of narrative when we don't neglect it? I present a model of narrative dialogue from a postclassical perspective, highlighting some underexplored, feminist implications of Gérard Genette's remarks on direct speech. Genette describes direct speech as the outside limit of narrative discourse. Thus, scaling up from Genette's definition, we might say that dialogue also lies at the border of a classical narratological system. Finally, I turn to a sequence of early works by Gertrude Stein as a case study of the narrative agency implicit in dialogue's liminal status. From the realist 'Q.E.D.' to the proto-modernist 'Melanctha', Stein uses

¹ Mark Twain, 'Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences', in *The Portable Mark Twain*, ed. Bernard de Voto (New York: Penguin, 1977), 542.

dialogue as a gateway to experimental language, a means of disrupting narrative conventions and their accompanying politics.

Why Has Narrative Theory Neglected Dialogue Between Characters?²

Mark Twain's remarks on dialogue in 'Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offences' tap into a widespread expectation of verisimilitude in the representation of speech. Although the essay is largely facetious, Twain's stipulation that 'talk should sound like human talk' is a position so pervasive that much of the early criticism on direct speech in the novel has been taken up with disproving it. For example, in *Speech in the English Novel*, Norman Page argues that the novel at best only offers 'an *idealization* of real speech,' a tidied-up rather than verisimilar representation.³ Perhaps we can attribute narrative theory's general neglect of dialogue to this undue burden of verisimilitude. If dialogue does little more than add a touch of local colour, it must not be integral to the structure of narrative.

More likely, the relative lack of scholarship on dialogue might be explained as the lasting impact of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the subject. Bakhtin's theory of the novel as dialogic is so totalizing that it seems to foreclose any need for continued analysis of speech between characters. Bakhtin sees novelistic dialogue as a scale model of the novel writ large. Dialogue is a form of discourse that is inherently open-ended, and therefore dialogue is an apt metaphor for the undecidable ambiguity of the novel, a radically democratic genre in which even the author's voice is just one among many. In 'Discourse in the Novel', dialogue becomes the master metaphor for every feature of novelistic language. The novel is dialogic, each discourse within it is dialogic, its words themselves are dialogic. But 'dialogue' – the formal structure of direct representation of alternating characters' speech – is not exceptional as a category in and of itself: when we consider that the novel is full of voices at every formal level, quotation marks separating certain voices from others seem only an artifice of conventional grammar.⁴

Something similar might be said of the dialogue novel: when almost everything in the novel is speech, speech itself loses its distinctness as a category of discourse in the novel and becomes instead a larger rubric for looking at the form of the novel writ large. As John Mepham has shown, during the modernist period, the boundaries between characters' voices and between characters and the narrator, become more fluid. When lines between speech and thought blur, quotation marks appear arbitrary.⁵ Or, as Richard Bridgman has argued, with the rise of a colloquial style in the American context in particular, narration takes on the vernacular quality of speech, erasing hard and fast

² I borrow this heuristic from another, somewhat Twainian, comedic essay. 'What's up with narrative theory's neglect of dialogue between characters?' asks one character of another in the fictional dialogue James Phelan constructs in his essay 'Imagining a Sequel to Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction: Or a Dialogue on Dialogue*': 'I can see why you guys are so interested in narrators and narrative discourse, but shouldn't dialogue get something approaching equal time?' Although Phelan proposes a new model of dialogue to remedy this neglect, the question of why classical narratology spends so little time on dialogue remains largely unaddressed in his essay. See James Phelan, 'Imagining a Sequel to Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction: Or a Dialogue on Dialogue*', *Comparative Critical Studies* 7.2-3 (2010): 244.

³ Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), 19.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422.

⁵ John Mepham, 'Psychoanalysis, Modernism and the Defamiliarisation of Talk', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 4.1/2 (1998): 105-19.

stylistic distinctions between discourse categories.⁶ Thus, under the critical microscope, dialogue tends to lose its finite contours, its boundaries become fuzzy, they bleed outward into other things.

James Phelan's more recent work on 'character-character dialogue' quietly returns to Twain's perspective. In 'Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication', Phelan proposes a new model of narrative communication that includes fictional characters and character-character dialogue. Phelan critiques the story/discourse model's limited view of dialogue as an event in the 'story', and suggests instead that we consider dialogue as, simultaneously, 'story' and 'discourse'. Once we recognize character speech as discourse – as 'narration by another means' – dialogue can be easily assimilated to Phelan's rhetorical model of the novel.⁷ For Phelan, narrative is an act of communication from the implied author to the reader and all the elements of narrative exist in service of this larger function. The implied author is thus 'the grand conductor of narrative communication, the agent who seeks to make all the resources work together'.⁸ For Phelan then, like for Twain, dialogue is first and foremost a storytelling resource. It ought to have a 'discoverable meaning, also a discoverable purpose;' it exists to 'help out the tale'.⁹

But what about examples of dialogue that flout these rules and exceed this model? Dialogue scenes that go on too long, that bore us? That lead the tale astray, or stall its progress altogether? This article turns to several early texts by Gertrude Stein to rethink dialogue's place in both narrative and narrative theory. For Stein, dialogue is a mode of discourse at the very limits of narrative cohesion. Critics have celebrated Steinian dialogue for its resistive quality, often read as a refusal of the demands for order, coherence and legibility that undergird a variety of power structures.¹⁰ From this perspective, we begin to see how 'narrative theory's neglect of dialogue' might have more to do with dialogue than with narrative theory. Perhaps dialogue is not passively neglected, but actively resistant to narratology's abstract theoretical systems.

'The Documentary Autonomy of a Quotation'¹¹

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette defines direct speech as a vestige of the novel's emergence in a literary culture that ranked tragedy as the 'supreme genre' in the entire classical tradition.¹² Genette derives his definition of direct speech from Plato's distinction between 'mimesis' and 'diegesis'. For Plato, 'diegesis' refers to the mode of discourse in which the poet narrates the actions of the hero in the past tense, while 'mimesis' describes the poet's shift to a first-person imitation of the hero's voice. Dialogue, then, is a 'mixed' form of discourse, a mixing of narration and direct speech, or of diegesis and mimesis in the Platonic sense.

⁶ Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁷ James Phelan, 'Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication: Or, from Story and Discourse to Authors, Resources, and Audiences', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 94.1-2 (2011): 55-75.

⁸ Phelan, 'Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication', 71.

⁹ Twain, 542.

¹⁰ Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) and Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 171.

¹² Genette, 173.

Genette, however, is less interested in mimesis in the Platonic sense than in how diegesis can approach a kind of mimesis, how narration approaches a complete imitation of the thing described. For Genette, narration is the heart of narrative discourse. But narration's mimetic capability is fundamentally limited. Genette concedes with disappointment: 'The truth is that mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words'.¹³ Narration falls short of 'true' mimesis because words on the page are not the thing they describe but only ink on paper.

For our purposes, however, this description is enabling. If 'mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words', then direct speech is the only 'true' mimesis possible in prose narrative. The words that appear on the page inside quotation marks are words that describe words; everything else – tone of voice, gesture, etc. – is pushed out into narration. Perhaps surprisingly, then, Genette discards direct speech, the only 'true' mimesis possible in prose narrative, as uninteresting. For Genette, direct speech is not a pinnacle of mimetic achievement but a mark of the oppressive 'tutelage exercised over narrative by the dramatic model'.¹⁴ The dialogue scene – a scene comprised almost exclusively of the direct representation of alternating characters' speech – is a mode of mimetic representation 'borrowed from the theater',¹⁵ as is the term 'scene' used to describe it. Dialogue scenes are thus foreign to the novel, inimical even: 'Up to the end of the nineteenth century, the novelistic scene is conceived, fairly piteously, as a pale copy of the dramatic scene: mimesis at two degrees, imitation of imitation'.¹⁶ The presence of direct speech in the novel is an artefact of obsolete pressures, a weight that impedes the novel's independent development as a genre. Dialogue is thus figured as a weak imitation of the theatre, holding the novel back from the purely novelistic.

By this definition, direct speech remains unincorporated in the fabric of narrative, both in an ontological and a generic sense. Because the only pure mimesis possible in prose narrative is the mimesis of words, direct speech is the only place where the subject is completely autonomous from the diegetic mediation of the narrator. We might therefore think of direct speech as a discourse within narrative discourse that nonetheless remains 'autonomous' – both because the dialogue scene is a resistant vestige of another genre, and because direct speech resists assimilation by narration.¹⁷ Genette calls this, 'the documentary autonomy of a quotation'.¹⁸

Taken to its logical conclusion, Genette's definition of direct speech suggests a model of prose narrative as fundamentally split between direct speech and narration. Genette discards direct speech as external to narrative discourse and thus beyond the scope of narrative theory. Interestingly then, by cutting direct speech out of narrative discourse, Genette establishes narration as the proper object of narratology – and Genette's whole taxonomy of discourses relies on this initial splitting. Therefore, in the same stroke, direct speech is pitched beyond the province of narrative discourse and beyond the reach of narrative theory. As Genette defines it, implicitly, direct speech lies at narratology's outer limit.

¹³ Genette, 164.

¹⁴ Genette, 173.

¹⁵ Genette, 163.

¹⁶ Genette, 173.

¹⁷ In this sense, Genette's notion of dialogue as a 'mixed' discourse, comes closest to Bakhtin's model of the novel as inherently dialogic: an inescapably multiple combination of voices, discourses, and genres. Yet, significantly, Genette stops short of Bakhtin's model of the novel as split by infinite internal difference. In Genette's version, this split is strictly limited to the binary of direct speech and narration.

¹⁸ Genette, 171.

In their introduction to *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser characterize feminist and queer narratologies as positioned against ‘the scientific posture of structuralist narratology’.¹⁹ Citing David Herman, they date narratology’s postclassical phase to feminist scholars’ intervention in the field: ‘feminist narratology has been widely credited with the “postclassical turn” from a universalizing structuralism to a contingent understanding of “narrative grammar” as inseparable “from questions about the contexts in which narratives are designed and interpreted”’.²⁰ By thus bringing the subject position of authors and readers into focus, feminist narratology performs a critique of classical narratology’s universalism, even as it exploits the findings and vocabulary of the older system.

Like feminist narratology, my postclassical reading of narrative dialogue works against the totalizing and universalizing impetus of the structuralist model. In fact, existing work on dialogue in the writings of Gertrude Stein already operates from an explicitly feminist perspective. Thus, returning to Steinian dialogue as a paradigmatic example, I argue that narratology might be energized by paying attention to character-character dialogue as both a central component of prose narrative and the outside limit of the structuralist model. Dialogue lies beyond the scope of what Genette calls ‘narrative discourse’, and yet, simultaneously, dialogue is at the heart of narrative discourse, deeply embedded within it. If dialogue is the limit of narrative discourse, narrative discourse is structured around this limit. Finally, drawing on Genette’s definition of direct speech, I suggest a new approach to narrative dialogue. Once we recognize direct speech and narration as autonomous entities, we might define ‘narrative dialogue’ as both a conversation between characters at the level of ‘story’ and, simultaneously, a formal exchange between direct speech and narration at the level of ‘discourse’.

I would argue that a blanket treatment of dialogue as ‘narration by another means’ does not go far enough towards recognizing the unique position of direct speech within prose narrative and the unique narrative agency this position affords. Although a rhetorical model of fiction and its methods of reading for the implied author help us make sense of dialogue in many instances,²¹ the method works best on well behaved, realist speech and tends to overlook dialogue’s experimental leanings. As both a writer and theorist of the dialogue form, Stein helps us see dialogue as a discourse at the very limits of narrative cohesion. In ‘Melanctha’, Stein harnesses the ‘documentary autonomy’ of direct speech to undermine the authority of third person omniscience, replacing the narrator’s strict taxonomical system of language with words that refuse to reliably index meaning. Therefore, through the lens of Stein’s evolving style – from the realist ‘Q.E.D.’ to the modernist ‘Melanctha’ – we see dialogue as simultaneously a cornerstone of realism and a proto-experimental variable that threatens to unravel it.

¹⁹ Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, ‘Introduction’, in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 8-9.

²⁰ Warhol and Lanser, 6.

²¹ See, for example, James Phelan’s readings of Emma Donoghue’s *Room* in ‘Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication’, 71-74, and James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz’s reading of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in their section on ‘Conversation as Narration’ from David Herman *et al.*, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 37-8.

From 'Q.E.D.' to 'Melanctha'

Critics have long recognized 'Melanctha', the centre piece of *Three Lives*, as a reworking of Stein's earlier story, 'Q.E.D.'²² First brought to public notice by Leon Katz in his introduction to the novella's second edition, 'Q.E.D.' is an only thinly fictionalized account of Stein's first lesbian relationship. Gertrude Stein met Mary Bookstaver and Mabel Haynes at Johns Hopkins Medical School, where the three became tangled in a love triangle. The novella chronicles their acquaintance and Stein's (Adele) initiation into May (Helen) and Mable's (Sophie) world of emotional and sexual maturity. As Adele and Helen become increasingly intimate, Adele is slow to recognize the nature of their feelings for one another. For Adele, who identifies proudly as a 'typical middle-class person' equipped with proper reverence for 'the ideals of respectability and decency', lesbian desire is unspeakable.²³ Unable to articulate her own feelings, discovering whether Helen shares them becomes impossible. Therefore, perhaps most dramatically, 'Q.E.D.' describes a failure of language: Adele's failure to name and categorize an experience that lies outside her social epistemology.

Adele's quest for knowledge of lesbian desire plays out primarily through conversation. She confesses to Helen: 'All I want to do is to meditate endlessly and think and talk.'²⁴ For Adele, knowledge only exists as long as it can be put into words. For Helen, language is a system under which her desires are unspeakable, and therefore language must have only a limited purchase on real meaning. For Helen, feeling is a kind of knowing beyond language, better even.

In 'Melanctha', Adele and Helen's conversations about feeling and knowing are expanded, dilating the story an extra fifty-odd pages. This relationship crowds out the third prong of 'Q.E.D.'s' love triangle, Sophie Neathe, who fractures into a handful of minor characters. But if 'Melanctha' is another retelling of Stein's relationship with Mary Bookstaver, this time May is the heroine. May/Helen becomes 'Melanctha's' title character and Stein/Adele, her suitor, Jefferson Campbell. Like Adele, Jeff Campbell's epistemology consists of the dispassionate dissection of complex wholes into knowable units. Jeff, after all, is a doctor. He wants proof that Melanctha loves him and that when she tells him so, she means it. He believes that Melanctha's words ought to be transparent to her feeling. But for Melanctha, language has no such ability. She doesn't understand Jeff's need to lay everything out clearly in words. For Melanctha, feeling is proof enough. 'I certainly never did see no man like you, Jeff', Melanctha tells him,

You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling. I certainly don't see a reason, why I should always be explaining to you what I mean by what I am just saying. And you ain't got no feeling ever for me, to ask me what I meant, by what I was saying [...] You come and ask me what I mean by what I was just saying to you. I certainly don't know, Jeff, when you ask me.²⁵

²² For example, Carolyn Faunce Copeland finds 'some thirty-four parallels in plot and dialogue between the two works'. Carolyn Faunce Copeland, *Language & Time & Gertrude Stein* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975), 10. See also: Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 174. and, Leon Katz, 'Introduction', in *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings by Gertrude Stein* (New York: Liveright, 1996), xvi.

²³ Gertrude Stein, 'Q.E.D.', in *Three Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 209.

²⁴ Stein, 'Q.E.D.', 224.

²⁵ Gertrude Stein, 'Melanctha', in *Three Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 121.

A passage that could read merely as, ‘Stop asking me what I mean, Jeff’, is dilated into a pattern of repetition, forcing the reader to match its pace. The prose does not get to the point but dilates the process of getting there. Melanctha’s answer to Jeff’s incessant demand for a stable language, ‘all clear out in words’, is a repetitive style that refuses to instantaneously disclose its meaning. Like her character, Stein reaches for a language outside Jeff’s taxonomical system of knowledge, a language that embraces the opacity of words and the instability of meaning.

If narrative theory has been largely indifferent to dialogue, Stein’s critics tend to celebrate it as the heart of her experimental project. For example, Richard Bridgeman traces Stein’s modernism all the way back through her relatively tame dialogue experiments in ‘Q.E.D.’ to colloquial language in Henry James. Bridgeman finds distinctly vernacular patterns like present participles and repetition undergirding the experimental style Stein names ‘the continuous present’. Feminist criticism in particular has praised Stein’s dialogic style for the resistance it shows to largescale, abstract systems. For example, Marianne DeKoven finds Stein’s experimental writing inimical to the referential language that underwrites patriarchy. Harriet Scott Chessman revises this claim in her seminal work, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein*. By Chessman’s account, Stein’s writing toggles between referential language and the kind of anti-referential language DeKoven describes, creating a dialogic, middle style that refuses to stay fixed to any gendered categories. This tradition of feminist criticism offers a useful illustration of how the dialogue form, as Stein employs it, resists categorization and assimilation by largescale, abstract power structures like standard language or patriarchy. Insofar as classical narratology shares a tendency toward hierarchies and abstract systems, feminist models of Steinian dialogue offer a useful lens through which to explore dialogue’s formal resistance to totalizing models of narrative.²⁶

In *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*, DeKoven describes the experience of reading the repetitive style of Stein’s continuous present: ‘We begin to lose our linguistic mooring, the illusion of stability, clarity, firmness of symbolic language which allows us the mastery required by our everyday lives in patriarchal culture’.²⁷ For DeKoven, ‘[t]his detachment of language from referential meaning’ opens the way to what she calls ‘anti-patriarchal writing’.²⁸ DeKoven defines this experimental mode of writing as ‘that writing which violates grammatical convention’ and ‘disrupts conventional modes of signification’ and their accompanying politics: ‘The modes Stein disrupts are linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, referential, and heavily focused on the signified. The modes she substitutes are incoherent, open-ended, anarchic, irreducibly multiple’.²⁹ Although DeKoven does not linger on dialogue per se, Stein’s anti-patriarchal language specifically emerges out of her experiments with the dialogue form in ‘Melanctha’. From the realist ‘Q.E.D.’ to the modernist ‘Melanctha’, Stein uses dialogue to break the tyranny of third person omniscience and other conventions of a patriarchal, standard language. Stalling the motor of narrative desire, its

²⁶ Foundational feminist narrative theory more directly aligns classical narratology and patriarchy. For example, see Susan Winnett’s reading of Peter Brooks’ theory of plot. Susan Winnett, ‘Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure’, *PMLA* 105.3 (1990): 505-18.

²⁷ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 44.

²⁸ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 44.

²⁹ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, xiii.

rapid summaries and efficient descriptions, the dialogic mode unsettles the language of mastery. The dialogue form is thus the precondition of Stein's anti-patriarchal writing.

Stein defines 'the continuous present' as a language that shares the temporality of reading.³⁰ In this way, Stein's whole experimental project is an extension of the narrative temporality Seymour Chatman calls 'scene', a stretch of prose for which 'discourse time' and 'story time' are equal.³¹ In other words, 'the continuous present' extends the temporality of a dialogue sequence. Harriet Scott Chessman frames Stein's writing as an ongoing dialogue with the reader. For Chessman, Stein's writing maintains a continuously solicitous contact with the reader, intimately interweaving the reading experience and the narrative process. Her language is difficult to master, 'resisting traditional critical claims to objectivity and closure'.³² This porous, open ended, participatory style is an invitation to the reader to the utopian project of reconstructing language outside of patriarchy. Stein's dialogic style neither unilaterally razes phallogocentric symbolic language, nor unilaterally replaces it with a *écriture féminine*, springing straight from the woman's body, but reconstructs language as a dialogue between reference and materiality. In 'Melanctha's' terms, then, this kind of writing transforms language into a dialogue between 'knowing' and 'feeling'.

This debate over knowing and feeling is reworked a least twice from Stein's own experience, first in 'Q.E.D.' and then 'Melanctha'. Stein/Adele/Jeff take the side of 'knowing', while May/Helen/Melanctha take the side of 'feeling'. But more subtly, this debate is mapped on to another conversation in 'Melanctha', this time a conversation that plays out at the level of narrative discourse. In this final turn, the characters who stand for knowing and feeling, respectively, are recast in formal terms as the competing storytelling modes, narration and direct speech. Narration aspires to the language of mastery, a style that is 'linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, referential',³³ to borrow DeKoven's language. Like Adele, like Jeff, like the young medical student, Gertrude Stein, this narrator uses language as a hard and fast taxonomical system. But if narration maintains that 'knowing' is a language of stable meaning, dialogue replies in a style that performs the opposite position. Speech between characters is inherently 'open-ended, anarchic, irreducibly multiple'. Dialogue in 'Melanctha' pushes the language of mastery to its limits.

Thus, returning to the incipient dialogue of Stein's modernism, we find another conversation, a formal conversation at the level of narrative discourse. From 'Q.E.D.' to 'Melanctha', Stein comes to a new understanding of narrative as a language split between separate modes of 'knowing' – between direct speech and narration, or mimesis and diegesis. Over the next three sections, we turn to a more detailed account of how this model of narrative as a dialogue between two distinct modes of representation develops from the narration driven 'Q.E.D.' to the belated eruption of dialogue in 'Melanctha'.

³⁰ Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. and intr. Joan Retallack. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 220.

³¹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 72.

³² Chessman, 8.

³³ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, xiii.

Narration in 'Q.E.D.'

The biographical content of 'Q.E.D.' lends itself to a reading of the psychological motivations behind its composition. The story seems an effort to understand an overwhelming experience, a way of returning to the scene like a *fort/da* game, this time equipped with the necessary knowledge and language to make sense of it. Stein creates 'Q.E.D.'s' omniscient, third-person narrator as a distancing mechanism, separating the present writer from her previous self. The formal choice draws a hard line between the part of herself who does not understand and the narrator who does. This split does not merely describe a difference in knowledge between the old and new Steins, but actually constitutes the knowledge that differentiates them. The act of creating a third person narrator, of splitting herself from her own perspective, is an act that claims a position of knowledge beyond the limits of individual character. Unlike Adele who is lost in the overwhelming immediacy of her own experience, through the eyes of the narrator, Stein looks back on that experience at a distance as a stable object.

This narrator maintains clear boundaries between narrator and character perspectives, fastidiously avoiding mixing languages. For example, we see this commitment in the awkward externalization of Adele's thoughts as spoken monologue:

[Adele] meditated a long time. Finally she began to explain to herself. 'No I don't understand it at all', she said. 'There are so many possibilities... Of course Helen may be just drifting as I was, or else she may be interested in seeing how far I will go before my principles get in my way or whether they will get in my way at all, and then again it's barely possible that she may really care for me and again she may be playing some entirely different game'.³⁴

The narrator recedes behind the 'documentary autonomy' of Adele's speech. Careful quotation marks definitively split the two voices from one another, in conspicuous avoidance of either indirect speech or free indirect discourse. The narrator shrinks from the task of representing Adele's confused thoughts into the more concrete role of speech tagging, as if the narrator is comfortable reporting that Adele spoke, but uncomfortable with the bewilderment she expresses. Quarantined in quotation marks as direct speech, Adele's ignorance cannot taint the narrator's perfect omniscience. This omniscience therefore emerges as a commitment to difference, an absolute ability to differentiate, untangle and separately categorize that which might otherwise seem continuous.

Here Adele's speech takes on the diegetic function of an internal narrator. She becomes her own observer, a self-narrating character. Her monologue is what Phelan would call 'narration by another means',³⁵ and just like the narrator, marking out difference is Adele's approach to understanding. For Adele, 'explain[ing] to herself' is a careful process of separating the tangle of ambiguity into discrete units. 'I don't understand it at all' becomes a list of various possibilities, 'Helen may be just drifting', 'she may be interested in seeing how far I will go', 'she may be playing some entirely different game'. In Adele's very first speech to Helen in 'Q.E.D.' she describes herself along the same lines, 'I am reasonable because I know the difference between understanding and not understanding'.³⁶ By this definition, 'reason' is 'know[ing] the difference', a perspective that *knows by seeing difference*.

³⁴ Stein, 'Q.E.D.', 211.

³⁵ Phelan, 'Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication', 65.

³⁶ Stein, 'Q.E.D.', 207.

Adele's attempt at 'understanding' Helen is an act of breaking down the whole into component parts, just as the realist picture emerges as a series of concrete details. For example, the narrator introduces the characters by the particulars of their dress,

Their shirt-waists trimly pinned down, their veils depending in graceless folds from their hats, the little bags with the steel chain firmly grasped in the left hand, the straightness of their backs and the determination of their observation all marked them.³⁷

Realist clarity favours the list format, a format that inherently suggests a taxonomical system or a whole comprised of itemized pieces. Like the list, the realist picture is split by internal difference; a series of pixels – veils, hats, bags, chains – that aggregate without entirely integrating. Each item is a mark, trimly pinning the nebulous notion of character to a determinate set of firm details. Thus, for both Adele and 'Q.E.D.'s' narrator, to understand a feeling or a scene is to *see difference*, to break it down and describe it piece by piece. In these lists, language emerges as a means to clarity, a system of formal objectification.

Narration in 'Melanctha'

In 'Melanctha', 'Q.E.D.'s' categorical impulse is pathologized. The narrator's listing tendency becomes a cruel compulsion, reducing nearly all description into its most condensed format. 'Melanctha Herbert was a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent attractive negress', 'Rose Johnson was a real black, tall, well built, sullen, stupid, childlike, good looking negress', '[Melanctha] was patient, submissive, soothing, and untiring, while the sullen, childish, cowardly black Rosie grumbled and fussed and howled', for example.³⁸ Unusually long and staccato, these lists foreground their list-ness: each item is weighted equally, each disconnected from the next one. The ordering logic seems almost random. In some instances, consecutive adjectives seem thematically constellated. For example, 'black, tall, well built', cohere as physical descriptors; 'sullen, stupid, childlike', describe personality. This seeming progress from the outside, in, however, is quickly unsettled by a haphazard return to the physical with the last item, 'good looking'. The sharp affective shift from 'sullen, stupid, childlike', to 'good looking', further undercuts the order's apparent logic. In other thematic groupings, several items seem to revise a central concept. 'Patient, submissive' and 'untiring', for example, offer specificity to 'soothing'. However, this principle falls apart with a list like, 'Rose was a cute, attractive, good looking little black girl', a grab bag of equally non-specific synonyms that reads like, 'take your pick'.³⁹

'Melanctha' immediately and forcefully establishes these lists as a defining stylistic feature of its narrator – there are eight in only the first two pages of the story, for example. Closely identified with the third person omniscient voice, these lists are totally absent from characters' speech. Their unusual lengths call into question the use of adjectives in the first place: just how many adjectives does it take to describe a person? Like a name, a signifier which simultaneously describes and fails to capture its human referent, the list falls short of perfect mimesis. Ironically then, the extra-long list format only serves to underscore how much its representation misses.

³⁷ Stein, 'Q.E.D.', 251.

³⁸ Stein, 'Melanctha', 59-60.

³⁹ Stein, 'Melanctha', 61.

In the lecture on the mirror phase, Jacques Lacan describes the precipitation of the *I* in the symbolic matrix as a '*function of misrecognition*'. In his 'jubilant assumption... of his specular image' the child recognizes his own image even as he recognizes the failure of that image to live up to what Lacan calls the 'ideal-I'. This misalignment situates the ego

[...] in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality.⁴⁰

The child's recognition of his own image is therefore simultaneously a recognition that the respective image is not what it should be. The image he sees and its accompanying linguistic counterpart, '*I*', can only approach and never completely express the far more complex lived experience of the 'subject's becoming'. Like the image and the '*I*', the name the child is assigned only inadequately captures its referent. Like the child's recognition of himself as the imperfect image in the mirror, or the all too slim signifier, '*I*', recognizing the name as referring to himself is a kind of abjection. Forced to accept the inadequate name and the inadequate image as the signifiers of his far more complex self, the child concedes to a lifelong 'discordance with his own reality'. From this moment on, he submits to being misrepresented in the social.

If naming is an act of abjection, 'Melanctha's' narrator performs that act obsessively, referring to characters almost exclusively by name, often, ostentatiously, both first and last names. The narrator's long lists of adjectives might be read as similar acts of naming. Brusquely slicing the whole into neat descriptive units, the listed adjectives seem acts of violence to the infinitely more complex totality of a person. This violence is especially visible when the narrator's lists include racial stereotypes. Melanctha, who 'had been half made with real white blood', is 'graceful, pale yellow, intelligent', while 'black childish Rose' is 'unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless'.⁴¹ Or Melanctha's father, James Herbert, for example, 'was a powerful, loose built, hard handed, black, angry negro'.⁴² A string of repetitive blows, these lists of cruel adjectives abject the person described, demoting character to caricature.

Until recent decades, the blatant racism of these passages was largely ignored by Stein criticism.⁴³ In her 1989 essay, Sonia Saldívar-Hull draws attention to the hypocrisy of this oversight, especially for critics like DeKoven who embrace Stein's writing as politically emancipatory. She concludes: 'Perhaps this is Stein's political agenda. [...] The reader loses consciousness of the racism and classism because s/he is encouraged to think only of [aesthetics]'.⁴⁴ But even Saldívar-Hull recognizes that the 'racism all but

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function', trans. Bruce Fink, in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2006), 76.

⁴¹ Stein, 'Melanctha', 60.

⁴² Stein, 'Melanctha', 60, 64.

⁴³ 'Repeated passages of crude, profoundly offensive racial stereotyping should not be, but almost always are, overlooked by Stein critics', DeKoven writes, adding in a footnote, 'I am guilty of that oversight in *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*. In my case, and I suspect in many others, it is a result of mortified denial rather than indifference'. Marianne DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 402.

⁴⁴ Sonia Saldívar-Hull, 'Wrestling Your Ally: Stein, Racism, and Feminist Critical Practice', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 189.

disappears' when the story breaks into dialogue: 'Stein suddenly drops the racial generalizations in [the love story] that makes up the major part of "Melanctha."' ⁴⁵

Though initially praised for its 'colloquial realism', ⁴⁶ more recent criticism tends to agree that character speech in 'Melanctha' 'is not a literal transcription of Black English'. ⁴⁷ Stein was familiar with dialect writing in the Gilded Age and quite capable of enthusiastic imitations of it in her private writing. As Michael North observes,

When Stein wanted to write in dialect, as she did rather frequently in her letters, she used the same phonological and syntactical conventions that white American writers had been using for decades: 'The cakes did arrive and dey was damn good', or 'We is doin business too'. There is very little of this sort of dialect in 'Melanctha' itself. ⁴⁸

Provisionally, then, we might agree that 'the racial setting of "Melanctha" is both false and superfluous to the central story', as Milton A. Cohen suggests in a useful exploration of the ambivalent priorities of the story's racial hierarchy. ⁴⁹ The stock characters seem mere cardboard mouthpieces, standing in for the various position on 'knowing' and 'feeling' inherited from 'Q.E.D.' The racism of these caricatures calls attention to their artificiality, as if character were only of secondary importance, a necessary artifice to anchor dialogue.

Though the lack of explicitly racist dialect speech does not absolve 'Melanctha's' dialogue from less heavy-handed racism elsewhere, ⁵⁰ the emphatic racism of the narration sets that portion of the discourse apart. Narration and direct speech in 'Melanctha' are significantly split on the subject. Returning to our Genettian model of narrative as a dialogue between direct speech and narration therefore suggests another reading of racism in 'Melanctha'. If direct speech and narration are ontologically independent of one another, they might also be divided on the question of how race inflects character. The racism of the narration thus comes to seem inherent to the narrator's distinctive position within the discourse: a logical extension of the 'omniscient' third-person perspective and its tendency toward caricature, typology and biological essentialism. By importing an exaggerated version of 'Q.E.D.'s' narrator, 'Melanctha' critiques the racism inherent to

⁴⁵ Saldívar-Hull, 193. In her later work, DeKoven makes a similar observation: 'The visibility of the characters' race disappears and reappears throughout the text. In long sequences, particularly in the central movement of the novella that treats the love affair of Jeff and Melanctha, racial specificity [...] is suspended'. DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*, 71.

⁴⁶ 'The language in this work has been called "photographically exact"', writes Michael North, citing George F. Whicher. See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

⁴⁷ Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 38.

⁴⁸ North, 72.

⁴⁹ Milton A. Cohen, 'Black Brutes and Mulatto Saints: The Racial Hierarchy of Stein's "Melanctha"', *Black American Literature Forum* 18.3 (1984): 121.

⁵⁰ For example, Norman Weinstein argues that the speech patterns in 'Melanctha' simulate cognition. Weinstein writes, 'The peculiar character consciousness emerges in a peculiar syntax, a personal grammar specifically suited for the speed, continuity, and density of the characters to be observed'. By Weinstein's account, 'Melanctha' represents character as pace: as a particular grammar that moves the reader at the approximate pace of the mind of the character. Though race does not surface in Weinstein's account, his argument tacitly posits the story's 'achievement' as the representation of a slower kind of mind. The presumably white reader is grammatically recalibrated to match the mental pace of the Black characters. If we accept this reading, we must also accept that the racist position it advances is implicit in 'Melanctha'. Norman Weinstein, *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of the Modern Consciousness* (New York: Ungar, 1970), 24.

this position by parodying it. Racist stock characters like ‘a powerful, loose built, hard handed, black, angry negro’ seem the logical conclusion of blind faith in the language of mastery. As dialogue takes over the discourse, ‘Melanctha’ sheds this narrator, replacing its character typologies with a language that performs character as a ‘continuous present’ of becoming. The realist narrator fractures into hundreds of speech tags. The long lists of adjectives are submerged in the repetitive churn of character speech and dissolve.

Dialogue in ‘Melanctha’

‘Melanctha’s’ title character is introduced in the story as a woman who speaks her mind. She talks back to her parents and defies their authority by speaking to strangers. Her sharp tongue is repeatedly mentioned: ‘The young Melanctha... [had] a tongue that could be very nasty’, the narrator tells us. Even her father ‘feared her tongue, and her school learning, and the way she had of saying things that were very nasty’. But for all we hear about ‘all that talk Melanctha always made’, we have to take the narrator’s word for it.⁵¹ Melanctha’s speech is not represented directly until remarkably late in the story.

In Seymour Chatman’s terms, ‘Melanctha’ opens with a long period of summary, a stretch of narration for which discourse time is far shorter than story time. With major plot events and large spans of time glossed over in quick, broad strokes, summary has the effect of minimizing the agency of characters, ceding all authority over story and storytelling to an omnipotent narrator. This steady stream of narration is rarely interrupted by direct speech, and the direct speech that does appear is never answered. For example, a variety of nameless men solicit Melanctha’s attention,

‘Hullo sis, do you want to sit on my engine’, [...]
 ‘Hullo, that’s a pretty lookin’ yaller girl, do you want to come and see him cookin’. [...]
 ‘Say, Sis, why don’t you when you come here stay a little longer?’ [...]
 ‘Say, Sis, look out or we’ll come and catch yer’, [...]
 ‘Hi, there, you yaller girl, come here and we’ll take you sailin’’. [...]
 ‘Say, you pretty yaller girl, would it scare you bad to stand up here on top where I be?’⁵²

Although we are told that Melanctha is eager and receptive, we never hear her answer directly and these instances of direct speech are cut short of becoming dialogue. Submerged in the narrative discourse, Melanctha’s voice seems to build in increasing tension with the narrator. When Melanctha finally speaks, the narrator’s chokehold is broken and the narrative style shifts dramatically, as if all the built-up tension erupts in an outpouring of dialogue.

We might therefore consider ‘Melanctha’ as divided stylistically into two sections: before Melanctha first speaks and after. If narration is the dominant mode of the first section, dialogue is the dominant mode of the second. In the first section, the ratio of words of narration to words of direct speech is nearly 18:1. For every, single word attributed to a character there are 18 words of narration. In the second section, this ratio drops drastically to almost 1:1.⁵³ Suddenly, character speech and narration take up equal

⁵¹ Stein, ‘Melanctha’, 63, 72, 79.

⁵² Stein, ‘Melanctha’, 69, 70, 71.

⁵³ The first section contains 9395 words of narration and 525 words of character speech. The second section contains 21411 words of narration and 18805 words of character speech. The ratio of words of narration to direct speech in the first section is thus ~17.9:1 and the ratio of words of narration to direct speech in the second section is ~1.1:1.

space in the discourse. Thus, even at the purely numerical level, we begin to see another dialogue emerge in 'Melanctha'. From a strict hierarchy of discourses, of narration over direct speech, 'Melanctha' gives way to a more conversational model of turn taking, where each discourse has an equal say. Dialogue in 'Melanctha' is thus both a diegetic conversation between Melanctha and Jeff and a formal exchange between direct speech and narration.

Let's take a closer look at how this dialogue emerges in 'Melanctha'. Before Melanctha's first line of direct speech, the narrator intercedes to prime us for her statement with an indirect representation of her thoughts, 'Melanctha Herbert had listened to him say all this. *She knew [that] he meant it...and she was sure [that] some day he would find out...*'⁵⁴ If 'Q.E.D.'s' narrator shrinks from representing Adele's interior monologue, 'Melanctha's' does the opposite. Here, Melanctha's language is entirely submerged in the narrative discourse, depriving it of the autonomy of direct quotation. But the effect across both stories is similar. In 'Q.E.D.', Stein creates an omniscient narrator by splitting herself from Adele's perspective, establishing a hierarchy between Adele's ignorance and the narrator's more perfect knowledge. In 'Melanctha', the narrator lays claim to the highest position of knowledge, this time by assimilating character speech and thus undercutting its autonomy. We only access Melanctha's speech as the narrator sees it and not as it is in and of itself.

When Melanctha's words finally emerge in the next sentence as direct speech, they merely repeat the prefatory line of narration. The message repeats, as if to smooth the transition from narration to character speech, as if the transition would be too jarring, disorienting even, were Melanctha to pick up somewhere else. By framing the direct speech with its indirect speech double, the narrator attempts to bridge the ontological divide between direct speech and narration, asserting the narrator's authority, even over the autonomous discourse. Throughout the subsequent paragraph of direct speech, the narrator cuts in with speech tags, attaching the autonomous words to the specific context of their utterance and thus fixing their referential meaning unambiguously. For example, when the quoted speech states that 'you don't know very well yourself, what you mean', we can be certain that 'you' refers to Jeff Campbell and not 'you the reader'. Phrases like 'seems to me' and 'you find her' are disambiguated with tags like, 'said Melanctha to Jeff Campbell'. These speech tags serve to tighten the deictic field around the scene of utterance, attaching each isolated island of direct speech to the narrator's frame of reference.

The entire function of the narrator seems thus reduced to the maintenance of the deictic centres, first paraphrasing Melanctha's words and then tagging and retagging them. Take for instance the transition from the end of this speech to Jeff Campbell's reply:

'[...] No, Dr. Campbell, it certainly does seem to me you don't know very well yourself, what you mean, when you are talking'.

Jefferson had been talking right along, the way he always did when he got started, and now Melanctha's answer only made him talk a little harder. He laughed a little, too, but very low, so as not to disturb 'Mis' Herbert who was sleeping very nicely, and he looked brightly at Melanctha to enjoy her, and then he settled himself down to answer.

'Yes', he began, 'it certainly does sound a little like I didn't know very well what I do mean, when you put it like that to me, Miss Melanctha, but that's just because you don't understand enough about what I meant, by what I was just saying to you'.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Stein, 'Melanctha', 82, my italics.

⁵⁵ Stein, 'Melanctha', 82-3.

Placed side by side, Melanctha's and Jeff's statements do little more than repeat each other. Their referential meaning is entirely reliant on the way they are positioned within the context of the conversation. From this perspective, the passage of narration that intercedes – a glimpse of a scene, replete with realist details like 'Mis' Herbert sleeping in the background – exists almost exclusively to fix the meaning of the pronouns. We begin to see the realist scene as a kind of scaffolding, built to hold words and their referents together. Returning us to the scene of utterance to resolve minute referential ambiguities, the narrator secures the meaning of the quoted words and consequently, the narrator's authority over them.

As 'Melanctha' launches into increasingly experimental territory, direct speech shakes off this kind of narration. Description and indirect speech shrink away, and even speech tags disappear into the space between alternating quotations. For example, only a page later, Jeff and Melanctha exchange words entirely unsupervised:

'I certainly do understand Dr. Campbell that you mean you don't believe it's right to love anybody'. 'Why sure no, yes I do Miss Melanctha, I certainly do believe strong in loving, and in being good to everybody, and trying to understand what they all need, to help them'. 'Oh I know all about that way of doing Dr. Campbell, but that certainly ain't the kind of love I mean when I am talking. I mean real, strong, hot love Dr. Campbell, that make you do anything for somebody that loves you'. 'I don't know much about that kind of love yet Miss Melanctha'.⁵⁶

In this scene, the narrator is conspicuously absent. The 'documentary autonomy' of each isolated island of direct speech expands to fill whole paragraphs, crowding out speech tags and resisting the referential impulse of the narrator. The task of assigning words to their referents becomes a process internal to the dialogue, an entirely autonomous process. Each statement names its interlocutor, making the pronouns 'I' and 'you' fairly traceable, but abstract nouns like 'meaning' and 'love' shift meanings and are harder to pin down. The definition of these words become inseparable from their context. Their meaning resides in their relation to one another, in the dialogue form itself. Any notion of language as an abstract system of generalizable rules begins to seem impossible.

As Jeff and Melanctha's conversation unfolds, the strong, active directionality of the early narrator gives way to a slower, circular style. Far from the cutting voice of third person omniscience, this new style takes up the language of the direct speech, falling rhythmically into the dialogue. In fact, this story is the last time Stein uses direct speech proper. From 'Melanctha' to *The Making of Americans* and *Tender Buttons*, Stein drops quotation marks altogether and with them, the conventional split between mimesis and diegesis that structures realist narrative. 'Melanctha' therefore occupies a unique place in Stein's oeuvre because 'Melanctha' is both invested in this split and working toward abolishing it.

'Melanctha' tells the story of Stein's emergence from realism to modernism as a formal dialogue between direct speech and narration. From this transitional perspective, we see dialogue as simultaneously an everyday feature of realist prose and an experimental variable embedded within it. During dialogue scenes, the narrator shrinks or disappears from the discourse altogether. Everything we know about the storyworld is reduced to hearsay and all truth claims become relative. The relationship between words and their referents loosens. Cohesion threatens to unravel. To borrow DeKoven's

⁵⁶ Stein, 'Melanctha', 85-6.

language, ‘We begin to lose our linguistic mooring, the illusion of stability, clarity, firmness of symbolic language’.⁵⁷ Under such conditions, language slips beyond all reliable categories and communication no longer seems a useful model for understanding narrative. ‘Melanctha’ is a dialogue between standard language and a critique of standard language in the performance of its limits.

Dialogue and Postclassical Narratology

We might take this dialogue between different ways of knowing as a metaphor for narratology in its postclassical phase. In David Herman’s well-known formulation, postclassical narratology both ‘expose[s] the limits’ and ‘exploits the possibilities of the older, structuralist models’ of narrative.⁵⁸ Postclassical narratology thus contains an internal dialogue between classical narratology and classical narratology’s limits, between a desire for a universal index of narrative discourse and a critique of the colonialism implicit in such a project. With this critique always in mind, postclassical narratology proceeds more modestly on its dual mission.

Let us return to our initial line of questioning. Why has narrative theory neglected dialogue between characters? And, what happens to our theories of narrative when we don’t neglect it? Classical narratology tends to underplay the role of character-character dialogue in the structure of narrative. Narrative prose is filled with dialogue scenes, and yet, narrative theorists rarely consider direct speech as an object of formal interest on a par with narration. In *Narrative Discourse*, for example, Genette takes this bias so far as to suggest that direct speech is not properly novelistic at all, but a persistent vestige of the genre’s evolution out of the dramatic tradition.

I argue that dialogue’s marginal status is precisely what makes it interesting from the perspective of postclassical narratology. Dialogue indexes the limits of the structuralist system and thus might be mobilized to critique it. Reading ‘Melanctha’ against the backdrop of ‘Q.E.D.’, we see a conversation about what constitutes knowledge, translated into formal terms as a competition over the discursive space of the story. In ‘Melanctha’s’ narrator, we recognize a scientific posture analogous to the taxonomical impulse of classical narratology. In Stein’s story, this impulse is parodied, revealing the colonialism implicit in a blind faith in standard language as a universal index of subjective experience. But when direct speech finally breaks the narrator’s tyranny over meaning, the new discourse that emerges is not pure monologue but dialogue, a one-to-one ratio of direct speech to narration. If the dialogue form carries a liberatory promise, it is not the total upheaval of standard language but the more modest project of holding standard language in conversation with its own limits.

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⁵⁷ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 44.

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Dialogul și limitele discursului narativ. Gérard Genette, Gertrude Stein

Rezumat

Deși proza narativă este plină de dialoguri între personaje, dialogul a fost în general trecut cu vederea de diversele teorii narative. Discursul personajului ocupă în cel mai bun caz o poziție marginală în modelele clasice ale discursului narativ. Acest articol argumentează că statutul minor al dialogului se poate transforma într-o oportunitate de a regândi ambițiile naratologiei clasice și, astfel, acest discurs „marginal” să capete o poziție centrală în accepțiunea postclasică. Pornind de la afirmațiile lui Gérard Genette referitoare la vorbirea directă, argumentez că poziția unică a dialogului la limita discursului narativ conferă acestui mod de expunere un potențial anarhic. Abordarea operei lui Gertrude Stein dintr-o perspectivă feministă a elaborat un model similar pentru dialogul steinian ca formă de discurs rezistentă la exigențele limbajului patriarhal. Am putea astfel explora noi modalități de abordare a operei lui Stein și alege noi căi de a practica naratologia, aducând aceste domenii în proximitate.