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Writing and Merriment: Gertrude Stein's Erotics of Language¹

Abstract: As it revisits Gertrude Stein's relationship with Alice B. Toklas – lifetime companion, collaborator, and lover – the paper shows how Stein's writing is at the forefront of Modernism's poetic innovation by dismantling grammar and syntax, calling into question the referentiality of language, and dealing with words as if they were sensuous objects. It concludes that Stein's creative writing is as erotic as her love life.

Keywords: Stein, Toklas, Modernism, Language, Poetry, Eroticism

Resumo: Ao mesmo tempo que revisita a relação entre Gertrude Stein e Alice B. Toklas – companheira, colaboradora e amante de toda uma vida – o artigo mostra como Stein está na vanguarda das inovações poéticas do Modernismo ao subverter a gramática e a sintaxe, ao pôr em questão a referencialidade da língua e ao lidar com as palavras como se elas fossem objectos sensuais. Conclui-se que a escrita criativa de Stein é tão erótica como a sua vida amorosa.

Palavras-chave: Stein, Toklas, Modernismo, Língua, Poesia, Erotismo

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Description is not a birthday.

What did I say, that I was a great poet like the English only sweeter.

My three epigraphs are meant to suggest two major concerns in literary theory and criticism that haunt this paper: (1) the abyss between word (or image) and thing, masterly represented by Magritte's famous (non)pipe, and absurdly, if humorously, underscored by Stein in *Tender Buttons*;² and (2) poetic self-legitimation, as when Gertrude Stein coyly dares to compare herself favorably with Shakespeare (aka "sweet Will") midway through her erotic poem, "Lifting Belly".³ Shakespeare was Stein's model in more ways than one. Her celebrated explanation of the "rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" phrase only makes sense in connection with her remark about how Shakespeare amused himself by teasing

words (cf. Brinnin 1987: 164). She evidently understands Juliet Capulet's mistaken, Hermogenes-like wish to disconnect the name of the rose from the thing, so as to have her forbidden love for Romeo Montague sanctioned, as an instance of Shakespeare's linguistic amusement.⁴ In her repetitiveness of the rose, what is Stein actually doing if not teasing the word and thus reinventing the *name* finally to make the *thing* red again after hundreds of years? Actually, when accused of repetition, she would immediately retort: "No, no, no, it is not all repetition. I always change the words a little" (*apud* Brinnin 1987: 335).

Keenly aware of the staleness of worn-out words in modernity, Stein often sounds jealous of "Homer" or "Chaucer" for they had the privilege of experiencing the "excitingness" of "pure being" (her well-known formulation is "being existing") in the "intensity" of language-as-new (cf. Brinnin 1987: 337-338). High modernist poets like herself well understood her preoccupation, as when William Carlos Williams remarks that "Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean" (Williams 1969: 163); or as when Minna Loy understands Stein's writing as an exacting scientific experiment with words:

Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
 she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
 to extract
a radium of the word
(Loy 1997: 94)

Sensuality is a very important part of Stein's excitingness of language reinvented. Creative literature unconcerned with sexuality and eroticism was "inconceivable" to her.⁵ "Poetry and Grammar" (one of her *Lectures in America* [1935]) makes it very clear that her being in love produced "very good poetry".⁶ Stein had been writing *The Making of Americans* and then, she says, "something happened". She discovered, her wording in "Poetry and Grammar" leads us to conclude, the wonder of being in love (Alice B. Toklas had become part of her life). She discovered that things were finally made visible to her as sensuous things, and all of a sudden there was no balance in her writing, only passion. The poetic passion of naming. Not the passion of inventing new nouns for names that have been names for a very long time (that's the job of slang, Stein maintains), but the passion of naming anew, and repeatedly, the proper names of things:

(. . .) you can love a name and if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the name of anybody one loves. (Stein 1998b: 327)

All of a sudden, Stein was, Cratylus-like, conjuring up, not a vocabulary of thinking (as in *How to Write*), but a vocabulary of *thinging*. The sensuous thinging of “Objects”, “Food”, and “Rooms” in *Tender Buttons*. Names no longer represent the thing, they *are* the thing. The words are treated as sensuous objects in the text-as-sensuous-composition.

(. . .) I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names. And how was I to do so. They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry, I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it made the Tender Buttons, and the Tender Buttons was very good poetry. (Stein 1998b: 329-330)⁷

Gourmandise plays a crucial role in Stein’s creative writing as well. A whole paragraph in the first few pages of “Patriarchal Poetry” (1927) reads like a family joke parodying traditional, bourgeois weekly meals, which, one knows, at Rue des Fleurus were supervised, if not sometimes cooked, by Alice, Gertrude’s lover, homemaker, secretary, and typist (no relevant patriarch in sight):

Patriarchal poetry and not meat on Monday patriarchal poetry and meat on Tuesday.
Patriarchal poetry and venison on Wednesday Patriarchal poetry and fish on Friday
Patriarchal poetry and birds on Sunday Patriarchal poetry and chickens on Tuesday
patriarchal poetry and beef on Thursday. Patriarchal poetry and ham on Monday
patriarchal poetry and pork on Thursday patriarchal poetry and beef on Tuesday
patriarchal poetry and fish on Wednesday Patriarchal poetry and eggs on Thursday
patriarchal poetry and carrots on Friday patriarchal poetry and extras on Saturday
patriarchal poetry and venison on Sunday patriarchal poetry and lamb on Tuesday
patriarchal poetry and jellies on Friday patriarchal poetry and turkeys on Tuesday.
(Stein 1998a: 572)

But it is in the “Food” section of *Tender Buttons* (1914) that the reader senses how truly “drunk” with names the poet is, and can almost taste and smell the poet’s gusto as she parodically teases savory words out of their logical, referential usefulness in semantic sentences. Fine critics of Stein’s writing have remarked that conventional meaning is not the major concern of her syntax. Indeed, by mischievously dismantling

sentences and playfully destabilizing the act of reading, she efficiently undermines commonly accepted notions of meaning.⁸ Commenting on Stein’s work, Sherwood Anderson once wrote: “She is laying word against word, relating sound to sound, feeling for the taste, the smell, the rhythm of the individual word”. Stein’s writing is evidently a model and an inspiration for the kind of writer Anderson would aspire to be himself. “One works with words”, Anderson goes on further down in the same passage insisting on the sensuous materiality of language, “and one would like words that would have a taste on the lips, that have a perfume to the nostrils, rattling words one can throw into a box and shake, making a sharp jingling sound, words that, when seen on the printed page, have a distinct arresting effect upon the eye, words that when they jump out from under the pen one may feel with the fingers as one might caress the cheeks of [one’s] beloved” (qtd. in Vechten 1972: xx). Perhaps more than any other author, Gertrude Stein makes you realize how opportune Susan Sontag’s resistance to content-focused literary interpretation is (Sontag 1966: 3-14).

Consider the following passage:

Roastbeef Mutton Breakfast Sugar Cranberries milk
eggs apple tails lunch cups rhubarb single fish
cake custard potatoes asparagus butter end of summer
sausages celery veal vegetable cooking chicken pastry
cream cucumber dinner dining eating salad sauce
salmon orange cocoa and clear soup and oranges and
oat-meal salad dressing and an artichoke A center in
a table.

As the reader goes over the middle section of *Tender Buttons* (“Food / Studies in Description”), she realizes that the poet has deliberately upset the supposed logic of the itemized caption just reproduced above, not to mention the adequateness (or lack thereof) of “title” to “description”. “Milk”, for example, gets two different “descriptions”, as do “Cream”, “Eating”, and “Salad Dressing and an Artichoke”; “Potatoes” gets three, one of them as “Roasted Potatoes”; “Chicken” gets four; “Orange” offers variations (“Orange”, “Oranges”, and “Orange in” [the third one I shall come back to]), as does “Vegetable” (“Vegetable”, “Way lay vegetable”). Besides the strangeness of such titles as “Single Fish”, “End of Summer”, and “Salad Dressing and an Artichoke”, there is also a surprise item – “Chain-boats” – not to be found anywhere else in “Food”, or the whole of *Tender Buttons*, for that matter.

Stein and Toklas would have often seen chain boats towing barges up and down the Seine, probably transporting provisions for the city. At any rate, even goodhumoredly conceding that “a description is not a birthday” (Stein 1998a: 328), the reader is at a loss to make out what this “description” of a chain tug is doing in the midst of the “Food”

section of *Tender Buttons*. But I am sure that Toklas not only had no qualms about typing it, but was probably aroused by the memories it brought her. She knew from the start, as we have come to know, that *Tender Buttons* as a whole is a love poem addressed to her. Each paragraph-poem in *Tender Buttons* (literally arousing because, being “buttons”; they fasten and unfasten passion, like women’s nipples) is a naming indistinguishable from a sensuous thinging, a domestic still life, cubist style. In Gertrude Stein, Marjorie Perloff was the first one to note, poetry begins at home (Perloff 2002: 66). And I add: if not in the privacy of the bedroom.

Nonetheless, no matter what the topic, Stein’s writing is always about writing, and eroticism is of the text as much as of the body. Like sweet Will, she is a master punster, and Toklas is her first, and best, merry reader – the counterpart of writing and merriment is reading and merriment. It is not hard to imagine Toklas amusing herself during the day as she went on typing what Stein had written the previous night. Typing Stein while deciphering her illegible handwriting, what was Toklas actually doing? Copying faithfully? Or having fun re-writing here and there? Was she merely a pretty good typist or a quietly complicit pretty good co-author?⁹ Who actually “wrote” *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*? Drawing on a careful analysis of the highly cryptic “Stanzas in Meditation”, composed during the year that the referential and far more accessible *Autobiography* was written, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that the “collaboration” to which the poem frequently alludes raises questions of authorial ownership (cf. Gilbert/Gubar 1988: 252-253). Perhaps the extent of the collaboration between Toklas and Stein was supposed to remain deliberately undetermined. In Stanza XIV of Part IV of “Stanzas in Meditation”, we read: “This is her autobiography one of two / But which it is no one which it is can know (. . .).”¹⁰ As the reader gradually captures the gist of this alternative autobiography, she wonders if the different voices trying to come to terms with what appears to be a troubled relationship are meant to be exchanges or simply the poet’s self-searching ventriloquism: “Now let us think not carelessly / Not all about not allowed to change or mind. / Mind what you say. / I say I will not be careful if I do / I also say I should say what I do (. . .)” (Stein 1998b: 86, Part IV, Stanza XXIV). To my mind, the ostensibly rambling “Stanzas in Meditation” trace Stein’s stuttering search for peace in the relationship after a serious lover’s quarrel: “I can I wish I do love none but you” (idem: 145, Part V, Stanza LVIII). Not surprisingly, a line in Stanza XIV of Part IV (“She will be me when this you see”) echoes a phrase (“When this you see remember me”) repeated, with variations, several times in “Lifting Belly”, Stein’s ecstatic love poem to Toklas in the early days of their relationship (see Stein 1998b: 74; and Stein 1998a: 429, 433, 434, 452).

That Gertrude’s daily life with Alice is the focus of the poetry of *Tender Buttons* is not to be questioned. There can be no question either as to the pleasure they both must have taken in the agrammatical, destabilized, coded language of lovers in the poems. Take the last one in “Objects” and listen to the boudoir word exchanges of two women making love (Aider=Ada, one of Stein’s pet names for Toklas):

This is this dress, aider

Aider, why aider why whow, whow, stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.

A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.

Going back to “Orange in”, let’s ponder the extent of the intimacy enjoyed by these two women lovers as revealed in the writing and the pleasure the poet takes in caressing words and rhythms into a (no)sense, evidently only susceptible of being *fully* captured by her prime interlocutor:

Go lack go lack use to her.

Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal

Whist bottom whist close, whist clothes, woodling.

Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.

Pain soup, suppose it is question, suppose it is butter, real is, real is only, only excreate, only excreate a no since.

A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since.

In her brilliant, even though, to this reader, not entirely convincing, interpretation of *Tender Buttons* as representing “Stein’s fully developed vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy”, Lisa Rudick cracks some nuts (her expression) of the opaqueness of Stein’s poetry by making sound speak sense. For example, “Orange in” / “Origin”, “a no since” / “innocence”, and “no since” / “nonsense” (Ruddick 1990: 191, 231). “Excreate”, which Rudick takes to be Stein’s coinage (“ex-create”, she surmises), she understands as an unmaking (of “the existing order”) so as presumably to remake (a new order). Actually, excreate is a proper, though obsolete, word meaning “To cough or hawk up; to spit out” (OED, from Lat *ex(s)creāre*). In the context of the “Food” section of *Tender Buttons*, and “Orange in” specifically, excreate resonates with flatulence and excretion, scatological humor thus becoming part of Stein’s poem as well. From the notes that Stein used to send regularly to Toklas along with love poems we learn of Toklas’s alimentary problems. Offering food items presumably good for the digestive track (oranges, cocoa, clear soup, oat-meal), “Orange in” ends up in a diarrhea of nonsensical repetitions making perfect, anal sense: “(. . .) only excreate a no since. / A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since”.¹¹

Kenneth Burke once referred to the “private playfulness” of Stein’s writing (qtd. in Brinnin 1987: 326). We have many glimpses of this in *Tender Buttons*.

A petticoat.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (“Objects”)

Potatoes.

In the preparation of cheese, in the preparation of crackers, in the preparation of butter, in it (“Food”)

Sugar any sugar, anger every anger, lover sermon lover, center no distractor, all order is in a measure. (“Rooms”)

In the paragraphs isolated above from each of the three parts of *Tender Buttons*, each one with its own sensuous ambiance, several threads of meaning can be woven into the domesticity already announced by the three titles (“Objects” “Food” “Rooms”). Female underwear and the abandonment of bedroom intimacy. Cooking and the kitchen. Emotions and sentiment, this last one to be easily connected metaphorically with the previous two. For example: the juxtaposition of sweet and bitter loving with “measure” (measuring spoon?) suggests sexuality wishing to escape regulation. It would not be difficult to trace other lines of the same kind of signification. Clothing and sewing, eating and drinking, pecking and petting. A non-referential word composition, *Tender Buttons* still places English lyric poetry in the tranquil geography of trivial – yet joyful, playful, pleasurable, and caring – quotidian living and loving in the feminine. The poetic closure of *Tender Buttons* does away with bucolic sentiment only to make it strangely new by bringing “magnificent asparagus” and “a fountain” into the women’s sitting room:

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain.

Stein, writing *like* a woman but perhaps not as a woman, thus reinvents love poetry.¹² In a far more exuberant and explicit manner than *Tender Buttons*, “Lifting Belly” (1915-1917), which (like “Stanzas in Meditation”) was not published in Stein’s lifetime, speaks a new, two-voice language of sexual love and love making never heard before.¹³ “What did I say, that I was a great poet like the English only sweeter”. “Sweeter” than “sweet Will”, who often puns on sexual desire and gourmandise in a manner that is comparable to Stein’s in her erotic poetry: “Lifting belly this. / So sweet. / To me. / Say anything a pudding made of Caesars. / Lobster. Baby is so good to baby” (429); “Collect lobsters. / And Sweetbreads. / And a melon. / And salad” (432).

“Lifting belly is a language” (422), a coded language, to be sure, that savors and delights in the elliptical, syncopated dialogues of two women’s intimate living together and its many private double meanings: “Lifting belly lifting pleasure” (431). It is a language

full of the tastes, sounds, smells, and rhythms of female domesticity, yet fully aware of the world outside as well (including the Great War [e.g. 448]). While the language of “Lifting Belly” is crisscrossed throughout by enigmatic references, such as “a cow” and “two Caesars”, it is charmingly decodable in repeated readings of its self-interruptive and cross-referential repetitiousness. “Cow” may refer to the woman’s sexual organs (punning on the vulgar French term [“con”]), “Caesars” to her breasts, and what they can accomplish together, orgasm:

I say lifting belly and then I say lifting belly and Caesars. I say lifting belly gently and Caesars gently. I say lifting belly again and Caesars again. I say lifting belly and I say Caesars and I say lifting belly Caesars and cow come out. I say lifting belly and Caesars and cow come out.

It would be tempting to “decipher” the poem biographically (some people called Stein “Caesar” because, with her short haircut, she looked like a Roman emperor) and discover a “fatty” Gertrude, a “thin” Alice, and their “Ford” (or “Aunt Pauline”), or the hymeneal ménage of husband-Gertrude and wife-Alice as “jew lady” (443 – “my little Hebrew” was one of Stein’s endearing names for Alice). But, as always, biographism adds little to the aesthetic/erotic effect of the poem, beyond the envious titillation of peeping into the joyfully gratified life of two famous lesbian lovers living as “husband” and “wife” (“Darling wifie is so good”, “little hubbie is good” [453]).

“Lifting belly” is the poem’s major, slippery character(s), plot, language, and performance: “Lifting belly is alright. / It is a name” (413), “Lifting belly is hilarious gay and favorable” (416), “Lifting belly is a repetition. / Lifting belly means me” (422), “Lifting belly is dear” (424), “Lifting belly is so nice” (429), “Lifting belly is an intention” (439), (. . .) lifting belly is a quotation” (440), “Lifting belly is resourceful” (441), “Lifting belly is a miracle” (447).

In a word, lifting belly is the lovers as they engage in wording their love making and their simultaneous climax of pleasure itself: “Lifting belly is my love” (453). Traditionally enough (think of “The Song of Songs”, or Shakespeare’s sonnets), for Stein, too, sex and love making are the perfect metaphor for the wondrous complexity of life. The ecstasy of “being existing”, or the excitingness of pure being.

NOTES

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¹ This paper evolves from an earlier work of mine. See Irene Ramalho Santos, “Gertrude Stein. The Poet as Master of Repetition”, “Poetry in the Machine Age”, *Cambridge History of American Literature*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Volume V (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194-216.

² “Description is not a birthday” comes from “Food” in *Tender Buttons* (Stein 1998a: 328).

³ “Lifting Belly,” Part II (Stein 1998a: 426). My title is drawn from the very last line of “Lifting Belly”: “In the midst of writing, there is merriment” (*idem*: 458).

⁴ “O, be some other name! / What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet” (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II.2. 42-44).

⁵ “Literature – creative literature – unconcerned with sex is inconceivable” (Stein qtd. in Ghiselin 1985: 168).

⁶ In what follows, I draw heavily on “Poetry and Grammar” (1931), the essay where Stein reflects on the grammar of words: poetry, unlike prose, she argues, “[lives] in nouns” (“Homer,” “Chaucer,” and the Bible “were drunk with nouns”) (Stein 1998b: 313-330).

⁷ How not to think of that whimsical passage in *The Geographical History of America* (1936) that highlights the importance, for better or worse, of the solid wholeness of thing-like words? “I found that any kind of a book if you read with glasses and somebody is cutting your hair and so you cannot keep the glasses on and you use your glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by word makes the writing that is not anything be something” (Stein 1998b: 428-429).

⁸ Cf. Quartermain 1992: 21. See also Perloff 2002: 44-76.

⁹ I have in mind here the next to the last paragraph “written” by “Alice B. Toklas” in “her” autobiography which she seems to have ended up not writing: “I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs and I have to do them all at once and I found it difficult to add being a pretty good author” (Stein 1998a: 912-913).

¹⁰ See Stein 1998b: 73 (Part IV, Stanza XIV). On “Stanzas in Meditation” as “context” for *The Autobiography* and a key to a more complex understanding of the Stein-Toklas long-lasting relationship, see Dydo 1985: 4-20.

¹¹ On Stein and diet regimes, productivity, and waste, see Schmidt 2014: 27-56 (“Industry and Excess in Gertrude Stein”).

¹² Cf. The distinction is made by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her pathbreaking *The Pink Guitar. Writing as Feminist Practice* (1990). The distinction, as concerning Stein, is topic for another paper.

¹³ I quote from Stein 1998a: 410-458. Page numbers inserted in the text henceforth.

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