SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

Gertrude Stein's Differential Syntax

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> What is the difference between a thing seen and what do you mean. (Gertrude Stein, *Mrs. Reynolds*)
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> Successions of words are so agreeable.
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> A sentence means that there is a future. (Gertrude Stein, 'Arthur a Grammar')

THE FIRST AND ONLY MEETING between T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein took place on 15 November 1924 in her Paris salon at 27, rue de Fleurus. In the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein remembers it with some malice:

> Eliot and Gertrude Stein had a solemn conversation, mostly about split infinitives and other grammatical solecisms and why Gertrude Stein used them. Finally Lady Rothermere and Eliot rose to go and Eliot said that if he printed anything of Gertrude Stein's in the Criterion it would have to be her very latest thing. They left and Gertrude Stein . . . began to write a portrait of T. S. Eliot and called it the fifteenth of November, that being this day and so there could be no doubt but that it was her latest thing. It was all about wool is wool and silk is silk or wool is woollen and silk is silken. She sent it on to T. S. Eliot and he accepted but naturally he did not print it. (1998a, 857)

This turns out to be untrue since, after much procrastination, 'The Fifteenth of November' did appear in the January 1926 issue of the *New Criterion* (71–5). 'Fortunately', as Stein puts it delicately in 'The Fifteenth of November', 'replacing takes the place of their sending and fortunately as they are sending in this instance if three are there and one has returned and one is gone and one is going need there be overtaking.' Eliot, she

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knew only too well, had no use for her writing. He had, after all, politely declined to publish her Cambridge lecture 'Composition as Explanation' (1926), soon dismissing it in print as the work of a person who is 'going to make trouble for us', indeed 'one of the barbarians' (Eliot 1927, 595). 'Gertrude Stein was delighted', we read in the *Autobiography*, 'when later she was told that Eliot had said in Cambridge that the work of Gertrude Stein was very fine but not for us' (1998a, 858).

But not for us**.** For most of the century, this view of the irreconcilable difference between Eliot and Stein has prevailed. And yet, it may be more accurate to think of their poetics as two sides of the same coin. I shall deal with those two sides in a moment, but first it might be useful to examine that coin itself, which is the Modernist aesthetic, shared by Eliot and Stein, even as it was shared by Pound and Joyce, and the other central figures of the period.

First, consider the material conditions in which Eliot and Stein produced their work. Both were exile poets—a situation that made their awareness of their native American English all the more acute. Like Eliot's 'Prufrock', Stein's 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene', which I shall discuss below, was written in Paris in 1911; indeed, Miss Ethel Mars and Miss Maud Hunt Squire, the midwestern American ladies who came to Paris to take up art work and who provided the model for Stein's Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene, could well have emerged from the very drawing rooms frequented by J. Alfred Prufrock and Eliot's other leisured Bostonians. As in the case of 'Prufrock', the publication of 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene' was delayed by the war—in Stein's case, until 1922, when it appeared in *Geography and Plays*. As in Eliot's case, therefore, a form of avant-garde writing came to be associated with the 1920s even though it was conceived before the great rupture of the war years.

Secondly—and here Stein has often been misunderstood—both poets took the difference between 'art' and 'life' as axiomatic. In her late essay 'What are Master-pieces' (1935), for example, Stein begins by distinguishing between talking and writing—a distinction that Derrida has made the cornerstone of poststructuralist theory, reversing the traditional order which gave 'talking' priority. Stein herself gives neither talking nor writing pride of place, maintaining that each has its function. 'I talk a lot I like to talk and I talk even more than that I may say I talk most of the time and I listen a fair amount too and as I have said the essence of being a genius is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening' (1998b, 355). Here is the preoccupation with 'genius' Bob Perelman has discussed so interestingly in his recent study of Stein (1994:

129–69), but note that her particular kind of 'genius'—talking and listening at the same time—is qualified in the conclusion of the sentence: 'this is very important very important indeed talking has nothing to do with creation' (1998b, 355, my emphasis).

Why not? For one thing, as Stein puts it in *Everybody's Autobiography*, 'everybody talks as the newspapers and movies and radios tell them to talk the spoken language is no longer interesting and so gradually the written language says something and says it differently than the spoken language' (13). More important, 'talking' is related to 'identity', 'writing' to 'creation' or art. 'The thing one gradually comes to find out', we read in 'Master-Pieces', 'is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything. Identity is recognition, you know who you are because you and others remember anything about yourself but essentially you are not that when you are doing anything' (1998b, 355). And now comes the famous, 'I am I because my little dog knows me', followed by an enigmatic and important disclaimer: 'but, creatively speaking the little dog knowing that you are you and your recognising that he knows, that is what destroys creation. That is what makes school' (355). What Stein implies here is that self-consciousness—'your recognising that he knows'—a strong awareness of oneself, of identity—is the enemy of artistic creation, which depends precisely upon an emptying-out of such selfhood. 'At any moment when you are you you are you without the memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for purposes of creating you' (356). This formulation, purposely childlike and 'basic' as it is, recalls those famous sentences in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality', and 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality' (Eliot 1953: 17, 21).

'That', says Stein, referring to her little dog's recognition of herself, 'is what makes school'. And she adds, 'Picasso once remarked I do not care who it is that has or does influence me as long as it is not myself'. Here one is reminded of the 'Picasso' portrait of 1911, with its distinction between working and following: 'One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming'; 'One whom some were certainly following was one working' (1998a, 282). The distinction between the 'one' and those who are 'following' (the 'school') is made throughout 'Picasso', even as Isadora Duncan, in the 1912 portrait 'Orta, or One Dancing' is repeatedly called 'one being one', or 'one being the one', or 'being that one the one she was being' (1998a, 285–303). The distinction

between the one and the many, between the one who is working and the ones who are following is one Stein never repudiated. Followers, disseminators, those who belong to the 'school', have identity, personality, something specific to say; Picasso, by contrast, is 'one having something coming out of him'.

'The difference between art and the event', as Eliot put it, 'is always absolute' (Eliot 1953, 17). Stein and Eliot also agree that poetic composition is not a question of what but of how. 'There is a great deal of nonsense talked', Stein declares in 'Master-pieces', 'about the subject of anything':

> After all there is always the same subject there are the things you see and there are human beings and animal beings and everybody you might say since the beginning of time knows practically commencing at the beginning and going to the end everything about these things . . . it is not this knowledge that makes master-pieces. Not at all not at all at all. (1998b, 356).

Art, for Stein, has nothing to do with subject matter or psychology. How Hamlet reacts to his father's ghost, for instance, has nothing to do with the nature or value of *Hamlet* the play. 'That would be something anyone in any village would know they could talk about it talk about it endlessly but that would not make a master-piece and that brings us once more back to the subject of identity' (356). Indeed, identity, thriving as it does on memory and psychology, stands in the way of creation. The would-be artist becomes self-conscious, watching the impression s/he is making on others, and 'that is the reason that oratory is practically never a master-piece very rarely and very rarely history' (356). 'It is very interesting', Stein adds, 'that letter writing has the same difficulty, the letter writes what the other person is to hear and so entity does not exist there are two present instead of one and so once again creation breaks down.' And Stein corrects her earlier formulation vis-à-vis *The Making of Americans* that 'I wrote for myself and strangers'. 'If I did write for myself and strangers', she insists, 'if I did I would not really be writing because already then identity would take the place of entity' (357).

A concern for identity is thus seen to be at odds with the very process of artistic creation. Although her own writings cannot be pigeonholed as belonging to this or that genre, Stein does maintain the Modernist distinction between poetic and rhetoric, between aesthetic and instrumental value:

> In writing about painting I said a picture exists for and in itself and the painter has to use objects landscapes and people as a way the only way that he is able to get the picture to exist. That is every one's trouble and particularly the

> trouble just now when every one who writes or paints has gotten to be abnormally conscious of the things he uses that is the events the people the objects and the landscapes. (357)

The demand for autonomy—what Stein calls entity—is here made forcibly; entity is defined as 'a thing in itself [the Kantian *Ding an sich*] and not in relation' (358). 'Identity is not what any one can have as a thing to be but as a thing to see' (363). Subject matter, the world outside the text or the picture frame, matters only with respect to what the artist does with it. 'Nowadays everybody all day long knows what is happening and so what is happening is not really interesting, one knows it by radios cinemas newspapers biographies autobiographies until what is happening does not really thrill any one' (357).

The master-piece, the work that lasts, is, then, never characterised by its identity, by what it 'remembers'. 'It is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity' (358). Here Stein is closer than she realised to the youthful aesthetic of her sometime rival James Joyce. 'In order to see that basket', Stephen Dedalus explains to Lynch in the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. . . . You apprehend it as one thing.' Then, 'you pass from point to point, led by its formal lines . . . you feel the rhythm of its structure. . . . Having first felt that it is one thing you feel now that it is a thing.' And finally, 'You see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing' (Joyce, 230–1). It doesn't matter that Joyce refers to these three aspects of art as *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *quidditas*—terms that Stein would no doubt have found pretentious—the fact remains that, as we know from the Picasso portrait, 'working' (as opposed to 'living' or being 'charming') produces that 'something' which is art, a something perceived as 'a solid thing, a charming thing, a lovely thing, a perplexing thing, a disconcerting thing, a simple thing, a clear thing, a complicated thing, an interesting thing, a disturbing thing, a repellant thing, a very pretty thing' (1998a, 283).

'The artist, like the God of the creation,' says Stephen Dedalus, 'remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce, 233). Despite the adolescent bravado of this famous formulation, it is not unlike Stein's distinction, cited above, between 'a thing to see' and 'a thing to be', between identity and entity. 'If you write the way it has already been written', we read in the lecture 'What is English Literature', 'the way writing has already been written then you are serving mammon, because

you are living by something some one has already been earning or has earned. If you write as you are to be writing then you are serving as a writer god because you are not earning anything' (1998b, 223).

Art is by definition not earning anything, which is to say, disinterested. From Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Pound and Joyce, the rejection of instrumental value is a cornerstone of Modernism. It has two corollaries that Stein also observes: the purity of medium and the insistence on Making It New. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein recounts her famous fight with Picasso on the occasion of his taking up poetry:

> When I first heard that he was writing poetry I had a funny feeling. It was Henry Kahnweiler the dealer who first told me about it. What kind of poetry is it I said, why just poetry he said you know poetry like everybody writes. Oh I said.
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> Well as I say when I first heard he was writing I had a funny feeling one does you know. Things belong to you and writing belonged to me, there is no doubt about it writing belonged to me. (15)

Stein's sense of ownership and entitlement has often been lampooned: in the Larry Rivers/Frank O'Hara collaborative lithographs called *Stones,* for example, there is a cartoon version of Gertrude telling Pablo, 'Poetry belongs to me and painting to you!' (see Perloff 1997: 102–3). But Stein's indignation that Picasso should think he could write poetry is based on the Modernist faith in technique as something to be learned and worked at. 'You know perfectly well the miracle never does happen the one that cannot do a thing does not do it but it always gives you a funny feeling' (Stein 1964: 15–16). When Stein went to Picasso's studio and he read her his poems in French and Spanish, 'I drew a long breath and I said it is very interesting.' And again, 'I had a funny feeling the miracle had not come the poetry was not poetry it was well Thornton [Wilder] said like the school of Jean Cocteau' (18). This is indeed a put-down, 'You see I said continuing to Pablo you can't stand looking at Jean Cocteau's drawings, it does something to you, they are more offensive than drawings that are just bad drawings now that's the way it is with your poetry it is more offensive than just bad poetry . . . somebody who can really do something very well when he does something else which he cannot do and in which he cannot live it is particularly repellent' (17). Indeed, as Stein explained it to Picasso a few days later, 'the egotism of a painter is an entirely different egotism than the egotism of a writer' (18).

Picasso, whose egotism was quite big enough to encompass both roles, was furious at Stein. He didn't speak to her for years. But Stein stood her ground: in *Everybody's Autobiography*, she takes pains to explain the dis-

tinction between writing and painting. 'The writer can include a great deal into that present thing and make it all present but the painter can only include what he sees and he has so to speak only one surface and that is a flat surface which he has to see and so whether he will or not he must see it that way' (34–5). This distinction may well have prompted Frank O'Hara to write his brilliant parody-poem 'Why I am not a Painter' (1957). Stein, in any case, made a similar distinction between painting and photography: 'photography is different from painting, painting looks like something and photography does not. And Cézanne and Picasso have nothing to do with photography but Picabia has. Well' (58). As for Surrealism, with its drive to exceed its chosen medium, Stein was unimpressed. 'The surréalistes', she remarks in *Alice B. Toklas*, 'are the vulgarisation of Picabia as Delaunay and his followers and the futurists were the vulgarisation of Picasso' (1998a, 865). In *Everybody's Autobiography*, she is even more severe: André Breton, she declares 'admires anything to which he can sign his name and you know as well as I do that a hundred years hence nobody will remember his name you know that perfectly well' (1964, 36).

Such statements of dismissal seem to anticipate the purist aesthetic of a Clement Greenberg. But—and here the picture becomes complicated—despite her objection to Picasso's poetry, Cocteau's drawing, or Breton's manifestos and poem-paintings, Stein found congenial the work of the most radical avant-gardist of all, Marcel Duchamp. How and why this is the case is another subject entirely; here let me just say that Duchamp, being neither a bona fide painter nor a self-designated poet, could be admired as a maker of the readymades, which were not so much intermedia as other-media and hence represented the ability—highly valued by modernism—to 'Make It New!'. Indeed, Pound's 'No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old', might have been Stein's own credo, as might Pound's dismissal of the nineteenth century as 'a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period' (11), which is echoed in Stein's assertion, in 'What is English Literature', that in nineteenth-century English literature, 'explaining' became predominant, 'And with explaining went emotional sentimental feeling' (1998b, 214). In the nineteenth century, she adds dismissively, 'words no longer lived . . . phrases became the thing' (215).

One of Stein's key statements in this regard is cited by Thornton Wilder in his introduction to *Four in America*. Wilder recalls that when Stein lectured at the University of Chicago, a student asked her for an explanation of 'A rose is a rose is a rose.' She answered:

> Now listen! Can't you see that when the language was new—as it was with Chaucer and Homer—the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there? He could say 'O Moon,' 'O sea,' 'O love' and the moon and the sea and love were really there. . . . Now the poet has to work in the excitingness of pure being: he has to get back that intensity into language. I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.

And Wilder further recalls:

> Miss Stein once said: Every masterpiece came into the world with a measure of ugliness in it. That ugliness is the sign of the creator's struggle to say a new thing in a new way, for an artist can never repeat yesterday's success. And after every great creator there follows a second man who shows how it can be done easily. Picasso struggled and made this new thing and then Braque came along and showed how it could be done without pain. (vi–vii).

Stein's distinction between Picasso's 'struggle' and Braque's 'painless' recreation recalls Pound's distinction in 'How to Read' between the 'inventors' and the 'diluters'—between the 'discoverers of a particular process or of more than one mode and process' and those 'who do more or less good work in the more or less good style of a period' (1954, 23–4). Again, Stein's is a thoroughly Modernist endorsement of genius theory as is her contention that the 'new' is so difficult to absorb that it is first perceived as 'ugly'—a notion that will be picked up, later in the century, in such texts as Charles Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption'. As for the literary 'inventor' Stein looked to as a model, like Eliot and Pound, she repeatedly singled out Flaubert.

For Eliot, Flaubert is the progenitor of the *mot juste*, the inevitability and economy of poetic language as well as its necessary detachment from its creator. But Stein's take is somewhat different. In the 'Transatlantic Interview 1946', she declares:

> Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition. Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole. . . .
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> After all, to me one human being is as important as another human being . . . the realism of the people who did realism before was a realism of trying to make people real. I was not interested in making the people real but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value. . . . I got it largely from Cézanne. Flaubert was there as a theme. He, too, had a little of the feeling about this thing. . . . (Hass, 15–16)

The Cézanne reference sheds light on Stein's proto-Cubist compositions, in which the figure-ground contrast is dissolved and one thing is indeed

as important as another thing (see Perloff 1999, 67–108). But the Flaubert connection is harder to understand. Stein's Flaubert is not the purveyor of clear, visual images or resonating nouns, nor is it enough to read Stein's *Three Lives* as an update of Flaubert's *Trois Contes*. Rather, as Lyn Hejinian, whose own poetry is perhaps the most 'Steinian' of our own time, points out in a brilliant essay on *Three Lives* (82–8), Flaubert seems to have given Stein the license to stress composition rather than representation, the play of signifiers rather than the pointing relation of signifier to signified. 'Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition' (1998a, 520).

'What seems beautiful to me', Flaubert wrote in a famous letter to Louise Colet that Hejinian cites in her 'Two Stein Talks', 'what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style . . . a book which would have practically no subject, or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible.' Again, 'The closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result. . . . It is for this reason that there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things.' And a third statement that must have delighted Stein: 'A good prose sentence should be like a good line of poetry—unchangeable, just as rhythmic, just as sonorous' (Flaubert, 154, 166).

Not the word or noun phrase (the naming function), but, in Flaubert's words, 'clear, sharp sentences, sentences which stand erect, erect while running' (160), becomes central. 'Erect while running' because the 'new sentence', as Ron Silliman was to call it half a century later (63–93), allows for no distinction between something called 'language' and something else called 'thought'—only, in Flaubert's words, a 'coinciding and merging'. One begins, not with an idea to represent in words, words that are then arranged in sentences, but with those sentences themselves. 'I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences', Stein declares in 'Poetry and Grammar' (1998b, 314). Grammar, by this account, is never arbitrary: part of speech, tense, case, and especially syntax have their own connotative power. For Eliot's emphasis on naming ('Madame Sosostris, wicked clairvoyante'), on getting the noun phrase just right, as in 'patient etherised upon a table' or 'Unreal city', Stein substitutes word order—an order so expressive that there would be no need for most punctuation:

> A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already there in the writing. Therefore I could never bring myself to use a question mark, I always found it positively revolting, and now very few do use it. Exclamation marks have the same difficulty and also quotation marks, they are unnecessary, they are ugly, they spoil the line of the writing or the printing. (1998b, 317)

Only the period remains for 'as long as human beings continue to exist and have a vocabulary, sentences and paragraphs will be with us and therefore inevitably and really periods will be with us' (321–2).

The difference between Eliot and Stein can thus be understood as epistemological rather than aesthetic. In terms of the distinction drawn at the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we might say that Eliot is an Augustinian, Stein a Wittgensteinian. Eliot—and this would also be true of Pound or Stevens—believes that words have a naming function, that they mean individually, whereas Stein believes that meaning is only conveyed by use, and hence by the larger context of the sentence. To see how this difference operates, we might begin with Stein's 1911 'story' 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene'.

Regularly Gay There

'Sentences', we read in 'Poetry and Grammar', 'are not emotional but paragraphs are' (1998b, 322). Whimsical as this statement sounds, it makes good sense: like a line in poetry (e.g., 'Let us go then, you and I'), which is not fully meaningful until it is followed by another line and another, until it has become part of a stanza or verse paragraph or even a page, the sentence is only a building block in the larger unit which is the paragraph. As Ron Silliman was to put it, 'linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning—such as emotion—integrate at higher levels than the sentence' (87).

Consider the opening paragraph of 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene':

> Helen Furr had quite a pleasant home. Mrs. Furr was quite a pleasant woman. Mr. Furr was quite a pleasant man. Helen Furr had quite a pleasant voice, a voice quite worth cultivating. She did not mind working. She worked to cultivate her voice. She did not find it gay living in the same place where she had always been living. She went to a place where some were cultivating something, voices and other things needing cultivating. She met Georgine Skeene there who was cultivating her voice which some thought was quite a pleasant one. Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene lived together then. Georgine Skeene liked travelling. Helen Furr did not care about travelling, she liked to stay in one place and be

> gay there. They were together then and travelled to another place and stayed there and were gay there. (1998a, 307)

Stein's use of repetition here, far from being excessive and boring as new readers of her work often assume, is characterised by its mathematical precision. A sentence is placed before us and then repeated with slight variation, each instance making us revise our sense of the one preceding it so that gradually meaning accrues. Thus, the seeming innocence of what sounds like a First-Grade Reader ('See Spot. See Spot run') becomes something quite other. Consider what happens to the phrases quite a pleasant (used 5 times), cultivating (5), voice (5), gay (3), and there (4), against the background of the repetition of the comically synonymous, sexually charged names Furr and Skeene and the rhyme Georgine Skeene.

'Helen Furr had quite a pleasant home.' It sounds neutral enough, 'pleasant' being one of those noncommittal adjectives that vary according to their context and the intonation of the speaker's voice, especially when the adjective is qualified by 'quite a'. The shift from *having* to *being* in the next two sentences and the substitution 'Mrs. Furr' and then 'Mr. Furr' for Helen Furr, has a subtle effect. First 'quite a pleasant' suggests comfort and ordinary pleasures when applied to a 'home', but by the third repetition it all begins to sound boringly bourgeois—a shade stifling for the Helen who is presumably Mr and Mrs Furr's daughter. However, so the fourth sentence suggests, Helen Furr may have something of her own: 'quite a pleasant voice, a voice quite worth cultivating'. The substitution of 'voice' for 'home' in what is otherwise a sentence, whose main clause is identical to the first sentence, as well as the introduction of the new information contained in 'a voice well worth cultivating', raises interesting expectations. Perhaps Helen Furr's 'quite pleasant voice' is no more significant than the rest of the 'pleasant' family apparatus. But 'worth cultivating' suggests that something is about to change for Helen, although it's not clear what it means to 'cultivate' a voice or what it is that makes a voice worth 'cultivating'.

The seventh sentence introduces the story's key word 'gay' (quite possibly used for the very first time in Stein's story in its contemporary sense of homosexual, but here only as an undertone).[1] It also introduces the

[1] The use of 'gay' here and in related Stein texts like *A Long Gay Book* (1912), naturally suggests that Stein may have anticipated the contemporary meaning of 'gay' as 'homosexual'. But there is no evidence that this was the case. Rawson (119–21) provides a very full etymology of gay, from its early use (seventeenth century) as a euphemism for a 'loose and immoral life', to its nineteenth-century designation of women of pleasure as gay women ('The gay women of this era

word 'living'. We can now surmise that whatever 'living' is like in the 'quite a pleasant' Furr home, it is not sufficiently 'gay' for Helen. And now comes the complex sentence, 'She went to a place where some were cultivating something, voices and other things needing cultivating.' The place is as unspecified as are the adjectives 'pleasant' and 'gay' and the participle 'cultivating'. And just what are those 'other things needing cultivating'? We can read a variety of stories, sexual or merely social, into these curiously neutral words. By the end of the paragraph we only know that Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene were 'together then' (when?) and 'stayed there and were gay there' (where?), but that there is also an area of difference between them: 'Georgine Skeene liked travelling. Helen Furr did not care about travelling, she liked to stay in one place and be gay there.' Just as fur and skin are synonymous nouns that can also have very different meanings, so the two women are separated by their attitude toward 'travel'—a word that again can have numerous—and, for that matter, contradictory—implications.

Having set up her network of sentences in which 'pleasant', 'voice', 'living', 'cultivating', 'travelling', and 'gay'—those non-specific and wonderfully suggestive words—circulate, the rest of the narrative follows. Being 'regularly gay every day' gradually begins to change, although the reader cannot specify where and when. For one thing 'cultivating' proceeds at a different pace, Georgine Skeene's voice being 'some said, a better one' and 'a quite richly enough cultivated one', whereas Helen Furr's 'quite pleasant' voice is no more than a 'pleasant enough' one. In any case, Georgine Skeene 'would have liked to do more travelling', and does travel to 'a place where her brother had quite some distinction'. She goes there alone—a prefiguring of things to come—whereas the two women visit Helen Furr's 'pleasant home' together. The first climax, if we can speak of climaxes in this verbal ballet, comes in Helen's reaction to one of these visits, rhyme producing meaning even more insistently than Eliot's refrain 'In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo':

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were said to lead the gay life, to work in gay houses, to be gay in the arse . . . and to gay it [either sex might gay it, this simply meaning 'to copulate'], to its underground meaning of 'homosexual,' first used in the 1920s in the private discourse of male homosexuals (pp. 119–20). Would Stein have known of this usage? Ronald Butters, the editor of the journal American Speech, who kindly alerted me to Rawson's very helpful dictionary, thinks that in 1911 when Stein wrote 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene', she probably did not, and observes that Stein's close writer-friend Sherwood Anderson used the word 'gay' as more or less synonymous with 'crazy'. Cf. Dydo, headnote to 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene', 254.

> Certainly Helen Furr would not find it gay to stay, she did not find it gay, she said she would not stay, she said she did not find it gay, she said she would not stay, where she did not find it gay, she said she found it gay where she did stay and she did stay there where very many were cultivating something. She did stay there. She always did find it gay there. (308)

Notice the mathematical neatness of the permutative process. The opposition between 'she would not stay where she did not find it gay' and 'she found it gay where she did stay'—provides us with what John Ashbery has called, in a discussion of *Stanzas in Meditation*, 'a general, all purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars'—not an account of what happened but 'a way of happening' (109). Why did Helen Furr break with her 'quite pleasant' parents? Because they disapproved of Georgine Skeene? Of her way of life? Or because she wanted to devote herself to her 'voice'? Or had found her place in the sun where 'some' were 'cultivating' 'other things needing cultivating'? Or none of the above?

This break, in any case, is now followed, by the introduction of a new complicating motif—the factor of men. 'There were some dark and heavy men there then. There were some who were not so heavy and some who were not so dark. Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene sat regularly with them' (p. 309). What transpires between the two women and these men is never specified. 'Dark and heavy' connotes masculinity—men who are really men—but then Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene also 'went' (a wonderfully neutral word that has become part of our vocabulary like 'seeing someone') with those who were 'not so dark' and 'not so heavy'. Is Miss Furr and Miss Skeene's 'gay' liaison now compromised by heterosexual relationships? Or what? How are their 'voices' affected? We only know that Miss Furr and Miss Skeene 'went with them, went somewhere with them, went with some of them'.

And now 'living' and cultivating' give way to a new participle—learning. Learning 'little things, gay little things', learning ways to be 'gay every day', 'using these little things they were learning to have to be gay'. And 'gay' becomes more and more obsessive an adjective, as 'regular' begins to give way to a particular moment in time: 'Georgine Skeene went away to stay two months with her brother. Helen Furr did not go then to stay with her father and her mother.' The affair is evidently over; Helen Furr is now able to be 'gay longer every day than when the two of them had been being gay' (p. 310). And the final page defines what being 'gay' without Georgine Skeene is like. Helen Furr's voice is now a 'quite completely well enough cultivated one' and 'she did not use it very often'. She no longer

needs her 'voice'—at least not a 'cultivated' voice—in order to be gay. 'Very many were telling about using other ways in being gay.' Telling is the new word here and we now find Helen 'telling others how to be gay'. The final sentence reads: 'She was living very well, she was gay then, she went on living then, she was regular in being gay, she always was living very well and was gay very well and was telling about little ways one could be learning to use in being gay, and later was telling them quite often, telling them again and again' (pp. 311–12).

Telling has thus replaced pleasant, cultivating, and travelling. But note that voice, originally, one assumes, a singing voice that needs 'cultivating', remains central to the 'telling', and that Helen Furr is now 'regular in being gay'. The story's ending is thus equivocal. Ulla Dydo sees it as dark: 'Without a lover, without an echo [Helen Furr's] stories lose life, her manner rigidifies, and the voice that the two had so carefully cultivated speaks in shrill hysterical repetitions, alone' (254). But one could just as well make the opposite case: now that Helen Furr has learned her way around, has become, so to speak, street-smart in the gay community in which she travels, she becomes the mentor, the teller of tales. No longer dependent upon her 'pleasant enough' parents, she is now in the thick of the action, 'living where many were cultivating something' and teaching 'very many then little ways they could use in being gay' (312).

There is no way to decide between these two and other possible readings. All we can say for certain is that something has changed, that the coming together of Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene has transformed Helen's life. But the specifics remain elusive. As in a Zen koan, repetition produces enlightenment for the reader, but enlightenment is not equivalent to knowledge. What does it mean to travel? What happens when the ladies sit with 'some' men who are 'dark and heavy'? What, for that matter, does it mean to 'sit' with someone?

For Eliot, Flaubert was the master of precision, of finding exactly the right word or phrase—the objective correlative—to embody a particular emotion or situation. Stein's Flaubert by contrast, is the shaper of economical and carefully formed sentences. Eliot's words resonate with metaphoric and symbolic implication; Stein's are just ordinary words—pleasant, voice, working, travelling, gay, regularly, learning, telling, there, then—and they are used quite literally. But what is the literal meaning of 'pleasant'? Of 'regularly'? Of 'telling'? We can give synonyms for 'pleasant' such as nice, agreeable, or likable, but finally the meaning of a sentence like 'Helen Furr had quite a pleasant voice, a voice quite worth cultivating' remains equivocal, its import changing even as we read the sentence

that follows: 'She did not mind working.' 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene' is not so much about affair as it is about the paradigmatic process of union and dissolution. Not psychology (we never really know what either character is thinking), not ethical or political import (Stein neither takes sides nor does she use the lesbian affair to make a particular point)—rather, in the words of Stein's later title, 'An Elucidation' of how a given situation changes. 'A sentence expresses that they continue when they start that is the left and right and also the place is chosen' (1995, 145).

Like Eliot, then, Stein foregrounds the constructedness of the poetic text, but for her, constructedness is a question, not of metaphor or symbol, allusion or citation, and certainly not of collage. Rather, her characteristic constructions depend on the placement of ordinary words in what are usually simple declarative sentences that combine in a tightly interlocking paragraph (and set of paragraphs) in which the verbal, visual, and aural are one, the conundrum being that whereas Eliot's poetry looks like poetry, Stein's often (as here) looks at first glance like ordinary prose.

But how ordinary is it? consider again the passage quoted above:

> Certainly Helen Furr would not find it gay to stay, she did not find it gay, she said she would not stay, she said she did not find it gay, she said she would not stay, where she did not find it gay, she said she found it gay where she did stay and she did stay there where very many were cultivating something. She did stay there. She always did find it gay there.

This sounds like a chant or nursery rhyme: both aurally and visually, the hallmark of the passage is its extreme artifice. The rhyming of the stressed monosyllables 'gay' and 'stay', 'there' and 'where', and the repetition of units of monosyllables, as in 'she did not' and 'she would not', puts into sharp relief the disyllabic and trisyllabic words not caught in the network of aural and visual chiming: in this case, 'Certainly Helen Furr' and 'cultivating something'. Certainly Helen Furr wants to be of the party of cultivating something and the paragraph enacts her decision in what is, to use James Joyce's term, a *verbivocovisual* complex.

A Room of One's Own

Despite its systemic patterning and its large scale indeterminacy, 'Miss Furr and Miss Skeene' does not violate the continuity of 'normal' narrative: first x, then y, then z. But within a year of producing this piece, Stein had moved on to the more radical mode of writing we find in *Tender*

Buttons, (published privately in 1914 by Donald Evans's Claire Marie Press). It was this mode that made Stein a favourite laughing stock. 'The words in [*Tender Buttons*], wrote an anonymous reviewer for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 'are English words, but the sentences are not English sentences according to the grammatical definition. The sentences indicated by punctuation do not make complete sense, partial sense, nor any other sense, but nonsense' (White, 9). It is a view still held by many critics: reviewing the Library of America two-volume *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century* (2000), for the *New York Times Book Review*, William H. Pritchard complains: 'Stein thought her effusions in "Tender Buttons" were poems, but almost 15 pages of them didn't convince me' (10).

Tender Buttons was begun in pre-First World War Spain. Alice recalls its gestation as follows:

> These were the days in which [Gertrude] wrote Susie Asado and Preciosilla and Gypsies in Spain. She experimented with everything in trying to describe. She tried a bit inventing words but she soon gave that up. The english language was her medium and with the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her. It was an escape into imitative emotionalism.
>
> No, she stayed with her task, although after the return to Paris she described objects, she described rooms and objects, which joined with her first experiments done in Spain, made the volume Tender Buttons. (1998a, 782)

This is an important statement, distinguishing Stein's practice, not only from the collage-making of Eliot and Pound, both of whom incorporated any number of foreign-language citations and allusions into their texts, but also from Duchamp's playful neologisms and Khlebnikov's etymological sound play—'fabricated words' if ever there were any.

In postmodern poetics, these modernist practices often intersect with the 'ordinary language' paradigm of Stein. But it is important to remember that Stein herself was a language purist even as she was a purist vis-à-vis her chosen medium. 'With the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved', and the English language in question was, as I argued in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, ordinary language, especially the connectives George Oppen was to call, some fifty years later, the 'little words I love so much'—articles, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns (Power, 198). Thus, whereas the noun or noun phrase was obviously central to Eliot:

> The winter evening settles down
> With smell of steaks in passageways.
> Six o'clock.
> The burnt-out ends of smoky days. (1970, 12)

and even more to Pound:

> Palace in smoky light,
> Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones,
> Anaxiforminges! Aurunculeia!
> Hear me. Cadmus of Golden Prows! (1993, 13)

Stein regularly dismissed the noun as the least interesting part of speech. In 'Poetry and Grammar', we read, 'A noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it. A name is adequate or it is not. . . . Nouns are the name of anything and just naming names is alright when you want to call a roll but is it any good for anything else' (1998b, 313–14). Adjectives are not much better: 'Adjectives effect nouns and as nouns are not really interesting the thing that effects a not too interesting thing is of necessity not interesting' (314). Verbs and adverbs are better because 'they can be mistaken': 'verbs can change to look like themselves or to look like something else they are, so to speak, on the move and adverbs move with them'. And 'then comes the thing that can of all things be most mistaken and they are prepositions'. 'I like prepositions the best of all' (315). They, as well as articles and conjunctions, 'have a greater possibility of being something' (316).

When, later in 'Poetry and Grammar', Stein famously distinguishes 'poetry' from 'prose' by declaring that 'Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying, with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun', whereas 'prose is essentially and determinately and vigorously not based on the noun' (1998b, 327), she is thinking, of course, of conventional poetry. To Make It New, one must, as she found out in writing *Tender Buttons*, make 'a thing that could be named without using its name' 'Was there not', she asks, 'a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them' (330). 'And so in Tender Buttons and then on and on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns' (p. 334).

The 'ridding myself of nouns' was central to a process that is still largely misunderstood. It is common to read, in current Stein criticism, that the title of her individual 'Tender Buttons'—'Glazed Glitter', 'Sugar', 'A Box', 'Mildred's Umbrella', 'Cranberries', 'Milk', 'Eggs'—are purposely misleading, that they have nothing to do with the descriptions that follow. After all, this line of reasoning goes, what relationship can there be between 'A blind agitation is manly and uttermost' and the title '*A cutlet*'? But of course, as in any text, once the title, centered on the page and italicised, is given, there is no ignoring its presence. As we read the

sentence or paragraph beneath a given title, we inevitably have that title at the back of our minds and try to see how title and text might relate.

Another common misconception about *Tender Buttons* is that Stein's focus on what Nicola Pitchford calls 'the gendered realm of consumer culture and domestic space' was designed as an 'attack on patriarchal representation' and that this subversive element is the book's novelty (650). Such a reading ignores the simple fact that Stein's carafes and cups, her cushions and shawls, her boxes and umbrellas, were the verbal equivalents of Picasso's, Braque's, and Gris's similarly 'domestic' still-life—still-life that, like hers, featured fractured and dismembered carafes and tablecloths, playing cards and wine goblets, fruit knives and buttons. Indeed the term 'consumerism' imposes an odd spin on Stein's 'objects', 'food', and 'rooms'—items which are neither more nor less than the stuff of her everyday domestic life. Just as William Carlos Williams wrote poems about parsley in a glass on the kitchen sink or an old woman eating plums that 'taste good to her', so Stein's *donnée* was that poetry begins at home.

And here again Stein is and is not like Eliot. The 'cups, the marmalade, the tea', 'cakes and ices' and 'coffeespoons' of 'Prufrock' have their counterpart in *Tender Buttons*, but whereas Eliot's eating and drinking rituals are always associated with the futility and false consciousness of modern social life, Stein's are regularly associated with pleasure, especially the sexual pleasure of women. Prufrock's question 'Do I dare to eat a peach?' has no place in the world of *Tender Buttons* where indeed one dares to eat a peach but where, in any case, the issue is not conformity to this or that social norm, but the nature of *peachness* itself. Potatoes and cranberries, eggs and milk, carafes and boxes—to meditate on these ordinary things is to refigure one's own place in the world of objects. Here is Stein's account in 'Portraits and Repetition' of the impetus of *Tender Buttons*:

> I began to wonder . . . just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. Did one see sound, and what was the relation between color and sound, did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself. All this time I was of course not interested in emotion or that anything happened. I was less interested then in these things than I ever had been. I lived my life with emotion and with things happening but I was creating in my writing by simply looking. I was as I say at that time reducing as far as it was possible for me to reduce them, talking and listening. . . .
>
> And the thing that excited me so very much at that time and still does is that the words or words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that

> to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing. (1998b, 303).

Note here again the distinction Stein makes between poetry and life: 'I lived my life with emotion and with things happening but I was creating in my writing by simply looking.' 'Poetry', Stein might say with Eliot, is not the 'turning-loose of emotion but an escape from emotion', although, as in his case, her words are themselves bristling with emotional, and especially sexual reference.

Consider the second poem in the 'Objects' section of *Tender Buttons*:

> GLAZED GLITTER
>
> Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.
>
> The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.
>
> There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine. There can be breakages in Japanese. That is no programme. That is no color chosen. It was chosen yesterday, that showed spitting and perhaps washing and polishing. It certainly showed no obligation and perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving. (1998a, 313)

This, like all the pieces in *Tender Buttons*, is often labelled 'abstract' or non-representational' in that it provides the reader neither with a coherent train of thought about something recognisable nor a coherent image of a coin or nickel object; indeed, there is no one object represented although there are certainly references to a nickel jar or carafe (in keeping with the first poem, 'A carafe, that is a blind glass'), or, say, a nickel spittoon. But what is it that is 'charming very charming' and what is the relationship of a nickel receptacle to such gerunds as 'borrowing' and 'giving'?

Stein, I remarked earlier, avoided the explicit allusion and citation that is characteristic of Eliot, and she had no use for neologisms. But etymology, the source of punning and riddling in such fellow artists as Duchamp and Khlebnikov, was very much her thing. According to the *OED*, nickel is 'a hard silvery-white lustrous mineral, usually occurring in combination with arsenic or sulphur and associated with cobalt; it is both malleable and ductile, and is now largely employed for various purposes, especially in alloys.' Its secondary meaning is, of course, a coin (in the US, dating from 1858, a one-cent piece). Nickel, the *OED* tells us, was named by the Swedish mineralogist Axel F. von Cronstedt in 1754, by abbreviation of the German kupfernickel, (coppernickel), 'the mining name of

the copper-colored ore (niccolite) from which the metal was first obtained by Cronstedt in 1751'. In German, the nickel of kupfernickel means 'dwarf, rascal, mysterious demon, the name being given to the ore because it actually yielded no copper in spite of its appearance'.

Did Stein know this particular etymology? Not necessarily, but she would have known the German connotations of nickel, which in this case, together with her familiarity with nickel and its uses as well as the sound of the word with its hard k, is quite enough. Thus her title immediately alludes to the inferiority of nickel among metals: all that glitters, she suggests slyly, is not gold and besides the metal is glazed, coated with a glossy surface. Indeed, the alliterative 'Glazed Glitter' connotes an artificial sparkle, a 'cover' designed, it seems, to make the ordinary mineral more attractive. The poet acknowledges this condition in her opening sentence 'Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.' Then, too, the 'cover' in question points back to the carafe ('A kind in glass') in the previous poem and forward to the next piece, 'A substance in a cushion', where we read 'A cushion has that cover'. Indeed, throughout *Tender Buttons*, Stein is concerned with containers, whether bottles or boxes, little closets or even rooms—with things that can be opened and closed and that have an inside and an outside. But unlike its 'cousins', Stein's nickel receptacle doesn't seem to have anything very interesting inside it and doesn't come wrapped like a present. So 'there is no search'.

Stein's composition cannot be paraphrased: 'There is', as she says herself a few sentences later, 'no programme.' All the same, hers is, like Pound's or Eliot's, language charged with meaning. For one thing, nickel is a hard substance not a tender button (with its French double entendre as *bouton tendre* or nipple). The very sound of the word 'nickel' conveys that hardness, and the velar stop k is repeated throughout Stein's poem, in 'cover', 'come', 'sinecure', 'clean', 'cleansing', 'convincing', 'color'. And nickel is also a paragram on the word nick, whose meaning as a noun—'notch', 'groove', 'slit', or 'incision'—intensifies the sense of hardness of the metal: a soft object cannot really have a nick in it. Then, too, the poem puns on 'nick' as in 'nick of time', and, in keeping with the time theme, 'Glazed Glitter' records some sort of 'change'—appropriate since a nickel is itself small change—from its natural hardness, a getting rid, so to speak, of nickel's metallic quality. 'The change in that is that red weakens an hour'—that red fades in time. 'Red' versus 'nickel', soft versus hard, weakening versus strength. And why not, since the hard mineral which is nickel (that rascal or demon) glitters when glazed? The contemplation of its motion is 'charming very charming'.

The second paragraph may well play on the definition of nickel as 'usually occurring in combination with arsenic or sulphur' and 'both malleable and ductile'. Nickel receptacles were familiar paraphernalia in Stein's medical school days as, for that matter, in the kitchens and bathrooms of Paris; they were more practical than glass or porcelain containers: 'There can be breakages in Japanese'. 'There is no color chosen' because the color is always the same but when a nickel object is first bought or acquired ('It was chosen yesterday') its glaze has not worn off and it is shiny and attractive, as it will be again after 'washing and polishing'. So, however ordinary and uninteresting nickel is, 'there is some use in giving'. A glazed nickel cannister or box would make a nice gift.

But what makes this oblique description a meaningful poem? If the text neither allows us to visualise the object of Stein's contemplation nor invites us to participate in the poet's meditation on this modest little counterpart of Keats's Grecian urn, if it neither seems to express the poet's emotions nor to make a statement about truth or beauty, what is 'Glazed Glitter'—or for that matter, what are any of these 'Tender Buttons'—for?

Here the syntax provides a clue. Stein's main verb is the copula, used in the present tense (fourteen times), primarily in the constructions, 'what is', 'that is', 'there is', together with their negation, as in 'There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine'; 'That is no programme'. The mode is therefore one of definition, specifically the form of definition found in the riddle. Conventionally, writes Andrew Welsh (30), 'riddle takes the form of a question and answer, i.e., a deceptive question and a 'right' answer which pierces some central ambiguity in the question', for example: 'What runs but never walks?' (a river) or 'What goes out without putting its coat on?' (a fire). By this token, Stein's are of course faux-riddles; in her case, riddling questions (appropriately without question marks) have no 'answers', ambiguous or otherwise. What they do is to expose the mysterious uses of language and hence the difficulties in communication.

'Glazed Glitter' is one of a series of poems that meditate on the appearance and function of containers, from the 'Carafe that is a blind glass' (see Hejinian, 99–103) to the two poems, each bearing the title 'A Box' (Stein 1998a, 314, 316–17). If these texts recall Cubism in their mode of decomposition and reconstruction of disparate verbal elements (Perloff 1995, 190–2; 1996, 83–114), they are also, to use Eliot's term, objective correlatives for a particular set of emotions. When nickel is 'originally rid of a cover', 'red' that 'weakens an hour' shows through—red, which relates back to the 'single hurt color' of the carafe in the

previous poem. In the second 'A box' (316–17), red literally 'shows' beneath the 'sick color that is grey'; indeed, in these poems about objects and foods, there are soft things inside or underneath covers—sometimes an oyster (as in 'A substance in a cushion' (313) and again in 'Cups' (338), where we are told that cups 'need a pet oyster', and in 'Orange' (343), where the punning riddle begins 'Why is a feel oyster and egg stir')—sometimes 'potatoes cut in between' (339), sometimes 'the dark red' that is 'bitten, really bitten' (336). In the course of the sequence, that which is inside the 'cover' is increasingly exposed, in an array of references to the female sex organs and to love making. 'Glitter', for that matter, can easily refer, as it does for a poet like Robert Herrick in 'Upon Julia's Clothes', to the 'brave vibration, each way free' of the naked body: 'O, how that glittering taketh me!' But then Stein's 'glitter' is 'glazed'—covered and protected—so that even here artifice or artfulness reigns.

In the course of *Tender Buttons*, the eroticism, still carefully masked in 'Objects', becomes more marked. 'Custard', for example, is described as having 'aches when'; 'Asparagus' as 'a lean to hot', 'Butter' as 'a need that a state rubber is sweet and sight and a swelled stretch' (338–9). One cannot, then, dismiss these poems as 'nonsense' or accuse their author of failing to display emotion. As Stein herself puts it in 'A carafe that is a blind glass', hers is a sequence that is 'not unordered in not resembling'. *Tender Buttons* concludes with a long prose poem called 'Rooms' that begins with a sentence that might be the epigraph of the whole sequence—'Act so that there is no use in a center'—and concludes with the following paragraph:

> A light in the moon the only light is on Sunday. What was the sensible decision. The sensible decision was that notwithstanding many declarations and more music, not even notwithstanding the choice and a torch and a collection, notwithstanding the celebrating hat and a vacation and even more noise than cutting, notwithstanding Europe and Asia and being overbearing, not even withstanding an elephant and a strict occasion, not even withstanding more cultivation and some seasoning, not even with not drowning and with the ocean being encircling, not even with more likeness and any cloud, not even with terrible sacrifice of pedestrianism and a special resolution, not even more likely to be pleasing. 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. (1998a, 355)

This is a delicate parody of the Romantic tradition. As in such famous poems as Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' and Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', the moonlit night is the scene of imagination and erotic longing. But

Stein playfully inverts the Romantic topos, giving in to a 'sensible decision', a decision that involves a long-winded argument that 'notwithstanding' any number of eventualities—the word 'notwithstanding' is used five times, followed by 'not even withstanding' (once) and 'not even' (four times)—'all this' (all what?) 'makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain'.

The 'notwithstandings' in the passage are worth examining. To begin with, 'declarations' and 'music', the trappings of romantic love, are discarded. Next, we read 'notwithstanding the choice and a torch and a collection', three nouns that seem not to be parallel but which make perfect sense when we stop to consider that traditional romantic love stories invariably involve choices, that they take place (*pace* Shakespeare and the mock-heroic Byron) by torchlight or perhaps in church when someone is taking up the collection. Notwithstanding, furthermore, 'the celebrating hat and a vacation'—trappings, this time, of romance as it is rendered in Impressionist painting as well, for that matter, as in Cézanne's Provençal landscapes and Picasso's portraits of Fernande wearing a large hat. The Big Picture—Europe, Asia, the world of elephants, of 'the ocean being encircling' and tales of drowning—is not for Stein. 'Not even with terrific sacrifice of pedestrianism and a special resolution, not even more likely to be pleasing.' What is rejected here is the literary drive to say something important, to make manifestos, and finally, to write so as to please an audience still accustomed, in these *avant guerre* years, to the jingly poems of Sara Teasdale or John Masefield. One must, in short, be pedestrian in both senses of the word, a poetic footsoldier rather than a general or admiral.

To turn one's back on poetic conventions, Stein implies, is to enter what is best described as a room of one's own. But she goes much further than Virginia Woolf in making a clean sweep of the old rooms. 'The rain is wrong and the white is wrong': once the 'lovely' Romantic imagery has been discarded, even rhyme becomes a new possibility: 'the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing'. In the end, *Tender Buttons* offers its readers 'incredible justice and likeness' in the form of 'a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain'. 'Asparagus' is the title of one of the poems in the *Food* section—'Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot. This makes it art and it is wet wet weather wet weather wet'—where the ambiguous grammar evokes an image of 'lean' 'hot' stalks, juicy and tender. But how is 'asparagus' related to 'fountain'? Not logically or spatially, surely; we would not find the two together in a still-life by Gris or Braque, much less Cézanne. But Stein's focus on the wet dimension of asparagus allows her to make a fanciful leap to her final word 'fountain'—

with its traditional sexual connotations, connotations soon to be played upon in that famous readymade not unlike Stein's own objects—namely Duchamp's *Fountain*. Not the moon or the green and white of nature is requested, but 'a chair and plenty of breathing'.

Like 'Prufrock', *Tender Buttons* was a coterie work until after the War, but whereas Eliot's poem became, by the twenties, a celebrated work, Stein's 'prose' sequence didn't come into its own until after the Second World War, and even today it remains largely unread—an 'eccentric' text that presumably cannot be deciphered. Yet once we understand Stein's way of writing sentences, her use of sound play and pun, her particular use of ellipsis and asyntacticality, metonymy and synecdoche rather than metaphor and symbol, her penchant for parody rather than irony, and especially her curious use of repetition, not of key nouns, but of 'colorless' connectives like 'notwithstanding', she emerges as not so different, after all, from the early Eliot. 'Prufrock', let's remember, is also a pedestrian, a walker in the city, and although Stein's allusions, like her reference to Picasso's portrait of Fernande in her 'celebrating hat', are more oblique than Eliot's allusions to Lazarus or John the Baptist or Hamlet—and, as I noted earlier, she scrupulously avoids citation—she shares Eliot's Mallarmean conviction that the poet begins, not with ideas to be embodied in words, but with the words themselves. The doctrine both poets follow is the Flaubertian one I cited earlier: 'the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with [thought], the finer the result . . . from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things.'

Form, in *Tender Buttons* as in 'Prufrock' is meaning. But by the time Eliot reluctantly published Stein's 'The Fifteenth of November' in the *New Criterion*, things had changed. As she puts it in that text:

> Entirely a different thing. Entirely a different thing when all of i has been awfully well chosen and thoughtfully corrected.
> He said we, and we.
> We said he.
> He said we.
> We said he, and he.
> He said.
> We said.
> We said it. As we said it. (72)

Whereas Stein moved further away from 'subject' toward language-game, producing certain texts that even her staunchest admirers have found

trying in their unreadability, Eliot began to poeticise specific topoi, as in the litany to the Virgin Mary in Part II in 'Ash Wednesday', where a particular understanding of the central Christian paradox seems to precede the poet's actual word choice:

> Lady of Silences
> Calm and distressed
> Torn and most whole
> Rose of memory
> Rose of forgetfulness
> Exhausted and life-giving. . . . (1970, 62)

How does this difference play out in the year 2000? Let me conclude by citing the opening of an intriguing little book that has just been published by Anansi Press in Toronto: Darren Wershler-Henry's *The tapeworm foundry andor the dangerous prevalence of imagination* (2000):

> Jetsam in the laminar flow andor find the threads in redhats andor litter a keyboard with milletseed so that exotic songbirds might tap out their odes to a nightingale andor transcribe the letters pressed onto the platen when stalactites drip on the homerow keys andor reconstruct the ruins of a bombedout capital I andor reinvent the canonic works of western art as a series of roadsign glyphs and or commission an artist the paint the large ass of marcel duchamp andor use a dotmatrix printer to sound out a poem in which each line is a series of pauses whose length is determined by formatting codes. (1)

Wershler-Henry's prose—one long sentence that goes on for fifty pages—markedly recalls the locutions and rhythms of Steinian prose. Again, his 'andor' functions very much like the 'notwithstanding' of *Tender Buttons*—'andor' suggests, as Michael Turner notes in his blurb, 'a variable state of inclusion and choice or exclusion'. But interestingly, Wershler-Henry's parodic 'roadside glyphs' are primarily loaded and allusive nouns, more fully in the Eliot than the Stein tradition: for example, 'exotic songbirds', 'odes to a nightingale', 'stalactites', and the 'ruins of a bombedout capital'.

Then, too, Wershler-Henry refers to 'the large ass of marcel duchamp'—a playful allusion to Duchamp's *Large Glass* as well as his moustached and goateed Mona Lisa, with its punning title *L.H.O.O.Q* ('Elle a chaud au cul'; 'She has a hot ass'). That link—and there are many others in *the tapeworm foundry*—suggest that neither the Stein nor the Eliot strains, retain their pure forms when they become prominent, as they do at the end of the century. One of the complicating factors—the 'escape from a paragraph by eloping along bottomless discourses', as Wershler-Henry puts it, is precisely the Duchamp input. But ironically Duchamp's own

oeuvre contains a delightful if veiled *hommage* to Stein: his female alter ego *Rrose Sèlavy*, who made her first appearance in Man Ray's brilliant 1921 photograph of Duchamp as elegant society lady, evidently received her 'Jewish' name—and sexual ambivalence—in direct response to Stein's 'Lifting Belly' (1917). It is in this long poem, after all, that we read:

> Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.
> In print on top.

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