

*Critical Essays on  
Gertrude Stein*

---

*Michael J. Hoffman*

1985

G. K. Hall & Co. • Boston, Massachusetts

(hereafter *O&P*) (Paris: Plain Edition, 1932), 11. All further references to this work appear in the text.

18. The five quotes are taken respectively from: 1) Kenneth Burke, "Two Brands of Piety," *Nation*, February 1934, 256; (2) Stark Young, "One Moment Alit," *New Republic*, 7 March 1934, 105; (3) Brooks Atkinson, review of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, *New York Times*, 17 April 1952, 35, col. 1; (4) Miles Kastendieck, "A Unique Experience: A Handsome Show," *New York Journal American*, 17 April 1952, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* (1952); (5) Gilbert Seldes, "Delight in the Theatre," *Modern Music*, March–April 1934, 138.

19. Richard Bridgman, James Mellow, and Linda Simon have each pointed to Stein's use of code names. Stein had early identified Alice with Saint Therese (see Leon Katz, "Weininger and The Making of Americans," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Spring 1978, 14). Given the highly lyrical and climatic ending of this aria, it is difficult to explain the repeated lament, "alas." Although no one has heretofore commented on the phonetic similarity of "alas" and "Alice," a similar connection has been made between the "aider" of "This Is This Dress, Aider" (the last poem in the "Objects" section of *Tender Buttons*) and "Ada," an early code name for Alice. Whether the aria is addressed to Alice or not, about which we can only speculate, it definitely originates from Gertrude Stein and not from Saint Ignatius.

20. Stein, "Plays," in *Lectures in America*, 129.

## A Rosy Charm: Gertrude Stein and the Repressed Feminine

Lisa Ruddick\*

We have rightly stopped hoping for a single key to Stein's abstract writings that would translate them into ordinary discourse. Yet we keep noticing in her texts bits of what looks like a private code. I believe that there is a code—one that, while hardly making every word or even most of Stein accessible, is more extensive than has been suspected. More importantly, the code is not only a means of referring to Stein's erotic life, although those who have identified disguised lesbian content are accurate.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is the vehicle for a sophisticated set of insights about gender and culture, insights that we do not ordinarily associate with Stein and that anticipate current psychoanalytic and feminist theory. I offer here a preliminary account of the central themes of *Tender Buttons* and other texts completed about the year 1912. These texts are meditations on the female body and its relation to a symbolic order that suppresses the female.

Stein's early work—particularly *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*—is indebted to the psychology of William James.<sup>2</sup> But the ideas of language and attention in slightly later texts, like *Tender Buttons*, both extend and radically deviate from James and from Stein's ideas when she was most influenced by him. Briefly, James divides the mind into a promiscuous and repressive faculty. While a part of us would like to notice

\*This essay was written specifically for publication in this volume and is included here by permission of the author.



every sense datum or subconscious fancy that arises, another part keeps practical existence going by making important selections, throwing certain impressions into relief and suppressing others. James calls this faculty "selective attention." Mental life proceeds by an ongoing compromise between selective attention and the indiscriminate tendency that brings new objects into view whether they are likely to be useful to us or not.<sup>3</sup>

The text in which Stein is closest to James is "Melanctha"; the heroine of the story reawakens her lover to the world of sensation by challenging his habits of selection. Melanctha shows Jeff Campbell the minutiae that he has characteristically ignored or dismissed as trivial. What he sees under her guidance is a chaotic field of "new things, little pieces all different."<sup>4</sup> There is a shift, however, in Stein's thinking: with *Tender Buttons* and the texts of 1912, she comes to think of the things that every mind suppresses as images connected with femaleness. Whereas Melanctha did her work by alerting Jeff Campbell to objects like plants and insects, in the later texts the "little pieces" of the world that move into view in moments of perceptual upheaval tend to be pieces of the female body.

The relevant works are *Tender Buttons*, *A Long Gay Book*, *G.M.P.*, and shorter pieces from the same period.<sup>5</sup> First, the female body itself is very much present in these texts, although the references are oblique. Richard Bridgman was the first to notice that *Tender Buttons* is unified by clusters of images, among them "dirt" and "versions of red—pink, scarlet, crimson, rose."<sup>6</sup> Although Bridgman does not analyze these images, they have sexual associations, in *Tender Buttons* and the other texts. Red and roses, for example, are used to suggest menstrual blood, sometimes with a negative association of something shameful or dirty: "A PETTICOAT: A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm" (*TB*, 471). Or the sexual organs themselves are red roses: "A shallow hole rose on red, a shallow hole in and in this makes ale less [Alice]" (*TB*, 474). Finally, the female body is a white flower stained, marked red, by sexual experience: "A RED STAMP: . . . [L]ilies are lily white . . . they dusty will dirt a surface" (*TB*, 465).<sup>7</sup> "The white flower has not been bled."<sup>8</sup>

These images of menstruation and defloration are reinforced by abundant allusions in the texts to "stains," "tiny spots," "bleeding" and "secretions."<sup>9</sup> Stein is doing more than to challenge the reader's delicacy. By focusing on an unconventional or even a suppressed subject, a "disgrace," she is doing just what she began to do with "Melanctha": she brings into view a region of common experience that is conventionally overlooked. James would call this an undoing of selective attention. Stein's task in these texts is not unlike Melanctha's with Jeff Campbell, that of forcing us to concentrate on "little pieces" of the world that are always there but that we normally do not like to think about. And as with the education of Jeff Campbell, part of the difficulty of bringing these little things into view is that of surmounting the reader's automatic resistance or disgust.

For one theme of these texts is that nothing is really disgusting if one

looks at it carefully. "[I]t is not dirty. Any little thing is clean" (TB, 479–80). This is why the idea of the red spot or the disgrace is often juxtaposed with the theme of seeing: "A BOX: Out of a kindness comes redness . . . out of an eye comes research" (TB, 463). "There is no disgrace in looking" (TB, 505); on the contrary, the act of looking with care eliminates the illusion of disgrace. The first section of *Tender Buttons* reads, "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color . . ." (461). Among its other meanings, this is an announcement of the author's intent to adjust our focus—give us "glasses" or "spectacles"—so that we will see certain objects (like "hurt colors") in a new way: they are inoffensive, they are "nothing strange."

The title of this entry is "A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS": another of Stein's frequent images for seeing is that of a bottle or glass, with something in it (again, a red thing, a dirty thing, here a "hurt color") that one can inspect with care. "[A] little glass, . . . an elastic tumbler, all this shows that . . . red which is red is a dark color" (TB, 505). So the myriad "glasses" in *Tender Buttons* may be either spectacles making us see things newly, or drinking glasses, receptacles containing the objects of inspection. Finally, they may be looking-glasses, mirrors that by reflecting things accurately once again remove the illusion of a stain. "The color is not a stain. It shows what glass is when there is a reflection." A compressed statement of her purposes, in a sketch called "Scenes," suggests that her writing itself is a looking-glass or a tumbler into which she tosses things for scrutiny: "Laugh the basket into a little glass and all the point is painted. So soon is the jewel and so dirty is the splinter"—and yet, she goes on, "it has no splinter." Whatever is in the glass is not "dirty" then, like splinters, but a "jewel."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it is putting the case too weakly to say that Stein wants us to see the "little things" she assembles as inoffensive; if they are jewels, they are positively good. The sequence "A PETTICOAT: a white light, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm" shows a movement not from "disgrace" to mere acceptability but from disgrace to "charm." The stain that seems bad at first is actually appealing. Many of Stein's descriptions of feelings and objects in these texts (including objects not associated with the female body) use the same progression from ugliness or distaste to pleasure. But they may also show a bewildering alternation, as in this description of an unspecified "thing": "to some it is a dreary thing, to some it is a dirty thing, to some it is a solid thing, to some it is a noble thing, . . . to some it is an ugly thing, to some it is a charming thing, . . . to some one it is a frightening thing."<sup>11</sup>

When Stein converts a menstrual spot from a "disgrace" to a "charm," she reverses conventional valuations. Yet in the passage that alternates between "dirty" and "noble," "ugly" and "charming," the effect is not of a reversal but of a collapse of all values. In fact, the two strategies, the inversion and the levelling of conventional categories, are directed toward

the same end. Both underscore the fact that our usual hierarchies are not natural. Stein may destabilize illegitimate hierarchies either by neutralizing them, showing that no one thing is finer than another, or by inverting them in individual instances to suggest that discredited objects can be just as "charming" as anything else.

Stein's method of challenging conventional patterns of appraisal is consistent with ideas she first heard formally from William James, whose psychology is dedicated to dignifying perceptual data that we habitually dismiss. But for James the mere disruption of hierarchies does not in itself get us anywhere; the goal of any conceptual upheaval is to generate better hierarchies. He would surely find the mere reversals and alternations of *Tender Buttons* misguided. Stein's program at this stage, which involves the collapse of all stable hierarchies of good and bad, has more in common with contemporary deconstruction than with James's psychology. She unsettles the notion that any one thing is naturally higher or better than another. "It is not more distinguished to be whiter than to be redder, to be taller than to be shorter."<sup>12</sup> Her object is to find a way of judging that cannot be undermined, one that is so free of artificial norms that its meanings are not changed even if one turns one's own perspective (or the object itself) "upside down": "A pale rose is a smell . . . that has upside down the same distinction."<sup>13</sup>

In *Tender Buttons* and the companion texts, many of the objects upon which Stein confers a new distinction are bodily stains, tokens of stigmatized femininity. A number of passages from these texts suggest that by dignifying what is female Stein is engaged in a self-conscious subversion of patriarchal or androcentric values. A comment in *A Long Gay Book*, from a passage about which I will have more to say, refers to a legendary time before women and their bodies were devalued: "Once upon a time there was a reverence for bleeding" (112). Stein restores that reverential attitude, removing the stigma. The collapse of the present dualism that divides the world into good and bad, clean and stained, means the recovery of the feminine that once was valued but now is discredited.

Stein in these years not only writes about the body; she also thinks of herself as writing with the body. During the period of *Tender Buttons*, and even somewhat earlier, Stein conceives of her writings as "secretions" (*LGB*, 110). In "A PETTICOAT," which is short enough to quote again — "a white light, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm" — the third term standing between the two menstrual images of "a disgrace" and "a rosy charm" is "an ink spot." The association is between the ink spots on Stein's page and the rosy spots on a petticoat. The "white light" that precedes all three terms then refers doubly to the blank page and to the petticoat just before either is marked.<sup>14</sup> Writing-as-secretion for Stein need not always be menstrual or even specifically feminine; it can be a generalized "mark" (*LGB*, 110), or any of a variety of bodily products, as the pun "excreate" in *Tender Buttons* (excrement/create) suggests.<sup>15</sup>



Hélène Cixous is one of a number of feminist critics who have called for a female idiom that will challenge "the phallogocentric tradition" by expressing not the superego which censors and categorizes, but the unconscious, which is capacious. Like Stein, she thinks of such writing as writing done with the body, for it involves a suspension of intellectual processes like selective attention. "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth."<sup>16</sup> Although Stein would not share Cixous' idea of the unconscious, her constant imagery of writing as secretion suggests that for her too self-expression involves a subversion of controlled intellectual processes. It happens, half-consciously, like the natural rhythms of the body: "Standing and expressing, opening and holding, turning and meaning, closing and folding, holding and meaning, . . . opening and holding" (*LGB*, 87).<sup>17</sup> This is hardly to suggest that in practice Stein writes by a process of free association or (to raise an old question) of automatic writing. She thinks about what she is doing, but she does not rule out the half-digested thoughts that enter her mind from moment to moment.

Writing about secretions, then, and writing-by-secretion accomplish the same end. Both undermine selective attention and its false hierarchies. For by focusing on bodily blots that are normally overlooked or even thought bad, Stein works against culturally imprinted habits of selective attention. Similarly, by writing *with* spots—with whatever comes out of her—Stein suspends censorship or selective attention in herself. These two different ideas of secretion merge in a passage in *A Long Gay Book*, where Stein also indicates by a pun that "secretion" is a nicely *secret* style that conceals her lesbianism or "difference":

[L]ife is that which when undertaken is not bashful. Why should it be bashful. Suppose there comes a time that shows there was a difference, is this any disgrace, does this make pride, it does not make pride but it does make secretion, and what is secretion, secretion is that amusement which every little mark shows as merit. A mark is very necessary.  
(*LGB*, 110)

Secretion is both things, a way of writing with one's own "little marks" but also a tolerant kind of writing that dignifies—"shows" the "merit" in—"every little mark."

We have been examining a set of images of secretion in these texts, images that serve to destabilize habitual judgments about what is good or important. A second set of bodily emblems in the text refers to the interior "space" or the womb. This, in Stein's view, is another falsely discredited object. In *Tender Buttons* she paraphrases conventional attitudes about men's and women's bodies:

. . . [T]hat is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest a pillar. Chest not valuable. Be papered.

Cover up . . .

(*TB*, 476)



The phallus is respected; women (at least those who "breed") are supposed to compliment it: "Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole." They sometimes politely exaggerate: "Next best and nearest a pillar." But the female receptacle, the "chest," is dismissed as "not valuable." Like the "stains" in these texts, moreover, women's bodies are not simply devoid of value but disgraceful, something to be carefully kept out of sight: "Be papered. Cover up."

Stein again reverses the appraisal, and declares women's anatomy good:

Any space is not quiet it is so likely to be shiny. Darkness very dark. . . . [T]here is that seeding. A little thing in is a little thing. . . . Does it dirty a ceiling. It does not. Is it dainty, it is if prices are sweet. Is it lamentable, it is not. . . .

(TB, 482-83)

The "space" is not "dirty" or "lamentable," after all. It is "dainty." For it is the site of fertility or "seeding" — it can have "a little thing in." The passage suggests the possibility of inspecting a seemingly blank space and finding it full of interesting things. It "is *not* quiet"; and if it appears "dark," it turns out to be "shiny" as well. It is not merely an absence.

When Stein speaks of this female "seed-space," she is often referring not to the biological organ that carries babies, but to a mental state that recreates the feeling of the womb, or the primal unity one had with one's own mother. She uses an image of a return to the womb: "MILK: Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter [udder]" (TB, 487). This notion of a mental "udder-space" is intelligible in the context of a hidden myth of human development that permeates these texts. The myth is articulated unsystematically, and tends to appear in coded form. But one can make out a central story about loss of the mother, entry into the world of the father, and the imagined recovery of the mother. "Mother" and "father," moreover, mean for Stein something very much like they mean for feminists influenced by Lacan.

The fantasized recovery of the mother repeats the notion of removing the stigma from femininity; once again, Stein resurrects a repressed realm of experience associated with women. The recurring plot in which these ideas are developed contains key images, which include sun, shadow, dirt, cleaning, cooking, seeds, rooms, spaces, spreading, and silence. We recognize these as the ubiquitous symbols of *Tender Buttons*, but they have genuine meanings that make *Tender Buttons* and the companion texts something more than wordplay or stylistic experiment.

The ur-plot begins in an enclosed space — both "pink," because it is made of flesh, and "green" or fertile:

Tender and not so blue, pink and white, and anything green greener, . . . all the tightness is identified . . . and the space is enthusiastic. This . . . is the beginning of that entry.<sup>18</sup>

The place described is both the uterus and the first stage of life ("the beginning of that entry") before the child is differentiated from the mother: "all the tightness is identified." Nor does the child differentiate objects from one another: the world is a "[l]ump of love, thick potato soup" (p. 250). He or she has not learned to apply mental categories, or to censor impressions by selective attention. The images Stein uses for this stage, in addition to green and "spaces," are wetness (suggesting both fertility and the fluidity of undifferentiated perception), cooking (since the world is like a stew in which things mingle), the house (another "space"), darkness (in which objects are not sharply distinguished), and also colors and taste, since perception in this phase is abundant and unmediated. They combine in passages like the following, from *G.M.P.*, which describes a young boy's<sup>19</sup> early experience at home:

All the pouring of the rain, all the darkening of the evening, . . .  
all the little fish-bones cooking, all the principal away and all the  
comfort of a home, . . . all the open space inclosing, . . . that is one way  
to expect a person. (249)

This could almost be read as an account of the beginning of life as envisioned by William James. James too thinks of childhood as a period of undifferentiated perception; what he calls selective attention is learned gradually as we acquire practical interests and a stake in the interests of society. Yet Stein's account, unlike James's, situates the child in a gendered world. What she describes is not just infancy but the reign of the mother. "[T]he principal," the father, is "away." He is the absent person referred to in the last clause, the "person" we "expect."

For it is the father who will introduce the symbolic order that breaks up this primal unity. Unlike James, Stein now thinks of the whole problem of language and perception as indissolubly linked to the family triangle. *G.M.P.* contains a short narrative explaining (in Stein's obscure idiom) how the shift from mother to father takes place. Anticipating Lacan, Stein makes the shift hinge on a primal scene and an Oedipal crisis.

Her protagonist of the moment, the same young boy whom we have just observed enjoying the absence of "the principal," walks in one day on a confusing scene: "Toss and spin . . . and roll in the hay in the center of the afternoon. . . . So then the union of the palm tree and the upside down one makes a lying woman escape handling." This witnessed act of intercourse marks a break in his life: "That was the period of that particular punctuation." He now knows that "all the gate is open to a push" — the mother can be entered — "and more [besides himself] can come to stay there." His reaction is the inevitable one: "A season of envy is a storm in the morning" (253–55).

His form of thinking immediately changes. Because he is now in competition with the father, the boy suddenly broods about concepts like

"obedience" and "authority" (254, 257). He learns a symbolic system, one that elevates the phallus over the womb: "There is a tail. There is a bewildering distruction [destruction/distrust?] of simple linings" (257). He may even forget the womb: "so thoughtless are the plain painstaking principles. . . . How they do not stay in the deep down. How they do not" (257). It is not fanciful to say that he learns something like phallocentrism.

When, in the maternal orbit, the boy perceived the world as a "thick potato soup," there were no categories of high and low; indeed there were no mental categories at all. But now he is schooled in the name for everything, and its place in a hierarchy: "Name and place and more besides makes the time so gloomy, all the shade is in the sun and lessons have the place of noon" (p. 256). The phrase about the shade and the sun explains what is happening. The sun—Stein uses the symbol repeatedly—stands for the father, who replaces the dark, mingling world of the mother with a field of vision in which everything is differentiated because cast in a bright light. These pages in *G.M.P.* are filled with images of a glaring sun rising in the sky.

But the ascending father also makes shade. While the objects he prizes are brightly lit, his hierarchies simultaneously create a shadow-world, composed of the things he pushes out of view. Thus the world of confused and abundant "colors," the world of the mother, gives way to a simplified world of black and white, good and bad, important and negligible. This is an extreme variety of selective attention. There is no confusion in Stein's saying that "all the shade is in the sun." The father is *both* the sun that exalts certain objects to notice, and the shadow that obscures or suppresses others. Two remarks, then, characterize this phase of life: "Color was disappearing," and, mournfully, "why is it all so changed and so simple, why is there such a long shadow" (260, 264).

One of the things partially suppressed by this new order is the feminine. As the "sun" ascends, the child's first world, the dark world of the mother, is demeaned. The order of the father inconsistently declares it both evil and nonexistent: "[t]he darkness is bad, . . . there is no darkness" (259). This despised darkness is reminiscent of the "chest" or womb in *Tender Buttons* that is both without value and a bad thing, to be covered up. In these passages from *G.M.P.*, there is a double concealment. Not only is the child's own woman-dominated, pre-Oedipal existence pushed under, but the new symbolic order he learns suppresses and devalues the female body. Women are viewed no longer as welcoming womb-spaces but as bearers of particular sorts of clothing; the clothes both stereotype them and literally cover them up. "There is a size corset"; "the authority is mingled with a decent costume" (257, 259). A strange new fiction denies biological facts: "there is no bleeding" (p. 260). This suppression of the female stain, familiar from an earlier context, is accompanied by an obsessional fantasy of getting rid of all sorts of pollution by scrubbing: "So



to clean that stinking has that odor." The goal is "[a] state where there is no dirt" (258).

Similarly, while the mother cooked by throwing everything into an earthy "potato soup," the father inaugurates a new bland cuisine whose only object is to sterilize. He boils: "Cooking is establishing a regulation . . . anything that is boiling is not withstanding cooking" (267). The point is to eliminate or lay claim to everything raw, uncivilized, outside the law of "regulation." So "the change is monotonous, . . . it means the baking of any piece of apple and pear and potato" (260-61).

The father, then, tries to transform or destroy rawness and dirt, whether he finds them in the female anatomy or in other alien things. In doing so, he works from a false dichotomy. He labels the female raw or natural, and himself the agent of civilization, yet this is a distortion. The mother herself was a cook, after all, who, with her more impromptu way of putting things together, *mediated* between nature and culture, between raw materials and the dinner table. Perhaps the very dichotomy between nature and culture, male and female, is part of a patriarchal language that artificially divides complex realities into black and white. The point would be reinforced by the fact that the father himself, whether consciously or not, crosses between traditional male and female roles, not only boiling but at times also "baking" (260-61).

One way of coopting or cleaning up women's bodies, in these texts, is by marrying them, thereby entering them into the male economy as objects of exchange. Stein uses two images for such an event: the "sale" of the body or womb, and its "collapse" or impairment. "RED ROSES: A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole. . . ." (TB, 473). The woman's collapse or sale is helped along by aggressive techniques of seduction; it is dangerous to allow one's "purr" to be "rubbed" by a suitor. "Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get. Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton" (TB, 475). The "sales ladies" may be either the sold ladies themselves, transformed into "saddles of mutton," or a band of traitorous matchmakers.

The transformation of women into use objects, "saddles of mutton," is symptomatic of an instrumental frame of mind in the world of the father. Even "time," in some obscure way, "was sold" (263). Things are valued insofar as one can own or use them. The same instrumentalism debases language. The mother, in the same long sequence in *G.M.P.*, introduces the boy to language, but to language as play. During the pre-Oedipal phase, "[A] speech is so transferred that alas is not mentioned. . . . The whole time of trial is in the recitation of the vowels and also in the recitation of the figures" (251-52). The child "recites" words and numbers ("figures") for the pleasure of it, as an experiment or "trial." He has fun: there is no "alas." But in the next phase, the free play is lost. Words are not things to be enjoyed but things to be used to get other things. What



develops is a "[a] language traded for tobacco, a language traded even for . . . corn." Like everything else in the black-and-white world of the father, language loses its texture, becoming "a language that is so fit to be seen exasperated and reduced and even particular" (274).

This story of the transition from the mother to the father is embedded in all Stein's texts in this period—texts that are not normally thought of as having plots or even discernible subjects. In passages that are superficially unintelligible, Stein repeats the tale:

Once upon a time there was a reverence for bleeding, at this time there was no search for what came. That which was winsome was unwinding and a clutter a single clutter showed the black white. . . . All this was mightily stirring and littleness any littleness was engaged in spilling. Was there enough there was. Who was the shadow.

The rest was left and all the language of thirty was in the truth. This made it choose just that establishment. . . . A likeness and no vacation. A regularity and obedience. Congratulations. (*LGB*, 113)

The epoch referred to as "once upon a time" is the pre-Oedipal phase, before the female body was suppressed; "there was a reverence for bleeding." (We are able now to be more specific about this passage.) "At this time," there was no selective attention, "no search for what came." Instead the world was perceived whole, like a potato soup or here a great "clutter." It was a "single clutter" because objects were not differentiated. Black and white were not yet defined: the clutter was so profound that it "showed the black white," confusing the contraries. In short, everything was fluid, "mightily stirring" and "spilling." As in the passages from *G.M.P.*, whoever is experiencing this state finds the perceptual chaos thoroughly pleasant: "Was there enough there was."

But this first paragraph ends ominously: "Who was the shadow." The shadow, as before, is the father. As he looms into view, everything changes. He ushers in new sensations of "regularity and obedience," and his medium is "language" (a "language of thirty," perhaps suggesting a marketplace idiom that quantifies things). Nothing goes unclassified: there is "no vacation" from "likeness" or conformity. Stein's bitter comment: "Congratulations."

Yet the word "vacation" here hints at the possibility of a holiday from the Law of the father. This in fact is one way in which the primal plot can end. The important moments of adult life for Stein are those in which a man or a woman slips through a crack in the symbolic order and recovers the maternal world. Many of Stein's old themes, and some important new ones, are compressed in an episode of escape from *G.M.P.*:

. . . [F]athers are dead. What are fathers, they are different. The casual silence and the joke, the sad supper and the boiling tree. . . . [W]hen the moment and the rejoicing and the elevation and the relief do not make a surface sober, when . . . the season to sow consists in the dark and no titular remembrance, does being weather beaten . . . not

show a sudden result of not enduring, does it not show a resolution to abstain in silence and move South. . . . Perhaps it does nightly, certainly it does daily and raw much raw sampling is not succored by the sun. (GMP, 274-75)

We know already that "fathers" make a "sad supper" by "boiling" everything into conformity (even, strangely, trees, perhaps in the process of making paper). But here, suddenly, "fathers are dead." More specifically, some unidentified protagonist moves beyond their reach. For he or she has enough of the father/sun, and feels "weather beaten." The "sudden result" is one "of not enduring": the person disclaims the father, resolving "to abstain in silence," and forgetting patriarchal ties. There is "no titular remembrance."

He or she escapes, with surprising ease: one need only go underground, or (a synonym Stein likes) "move South." For the father cannot claim everything; the sun cannot shine everywhere. There is still the shadow world, the repressed zone "not succored by the sun," which one can explore at will. Down there, nothing is boiled or regulated; there is only "raw much raw sampling."

What this means is that the life of immediate or raw perception, the pre-Oedipal form of life, is submerged by the father but never destroyed. Throughout adulthood, part of us continues to perceive things as an infant does. While our practical existence depends on conceptual grids that "boil" the flavor out of everything, we can relax our categories from time to time and see that our mind is full of brilliant, pristine data. At such an instant we take pleasure in the sheer abundance of impressions, useless from a practical standpoint but vital and invigorating. We stop selecting. The great burden of instrumental existence is lifted, and we feel "the moment and the rejoicing and the elevation and the relief." This shift in perception amounts to a recovery of the domain of the mother, a return to the early mental state that Stein symbolizes, here as elsewhere, as a dark seed-space. "The season to sow consists in the dark."

*Tender Buttons*, the most famous of Stein's "abstract" writings, is not so abstract as it seems; in fact, it is a prolonged enactment of the return to the mother. When Stein writes, "MILK: Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter" (TB, 487), part of her point is that one reenters the womb or udder through "sight" or perception, by seeing things (or hearing, feeling, or smelling them) in a new way. More accurately it is a primitive way, and the purpose of her text is to reawaken in us this form of perception. Or—a slightly different point—we recover the udder by *utterance*, by putting words together in ways that recall an earlier form of consciousness.

The word "excreate," in which we have already noticed one pun, contains a second:

Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal. Pain soup, . . . 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 since. . . . (TB, 496)

The images here are reminiscent of the "[l]ump of love, thick potato soup" that Stein used to describe the lively chaos of pre-Oedipal perception in *G.M.P.* But to reawaken that kind of vision, to turn the world back into rich "cocoa" and "soup"—to get back to what is "real"—one must "excreate innocence," create perceptual innocence by excreating or uncreating the world as one normally knows it.

Stein in *Tender Buttons* has various ways of recreating innocence in the reader. First, she undoes the symbolic order by using words noninstrumentally; even where we can identify discursive content, there is an element of verbal play that distracts us. Like the infant in *G.M.P.*, we experience words as sources of pleasure rather than only as ways of referring to other things. To force us to appreciate the texture of words, Stein uses puns, like "excreate," repetitive or rhythmic sounds, syntactic distortions, and, paradoxically, a sheer overflow of reference that makes the text obscure rather than transparent. "Please could, please could, jam it in not plus more sit in when"; "A little piece of pay of pay owls owls such as pie, bolsters" (*TB*, 474, 494).<sup>20</sup>

Second, Stein restores the perceptual indiscriminacy of the pre-Oedipal phase. She subverts selective attention by piling up objects and actions that demand dispersed attention. When we read "PEELED PENCIL, CHOKER: Rub her coke," or "Black ink best wheel bale brown" (*TB*, 476), we cannot emphasize certain words and slight others without knowing we are missing something. Everything strikes us as important, so we attend to all impressions equally. A third route to innocence is the strategy that was my original subject, Stein's recovery of the repressed feminine by dignifying the female anatomy. If it is true that the thing that makes the symbolic order possible is the elevation of the phallus over the womb, one begins to destabilize the symbolic order by bringing the womb back into view.

To the extent that *Tender Buttons* has a protagonist, he or she too keeps slipping through a chink in the symbolic order. "South, south . . . does silence choke speech or does it not" (p. 503). By going south or under, the speaker escapes the normal hierarchies in which the "speech" of the culture chokes or silences him or her. If the "silent" world, the repressed world that one enters as one goes south, can "choke speech," it is actually greater than the Law of the father.

Or instead of going under, the speaker may enter a fertile space, one that contains "ripe purple":

Room to comb chickens and feathers and ripe purple, room to curve single plates. . . , room to search a light that is simpler, all room has no shadow.

There is no use there is no use at all in smell, in taste, in teeth, in toast, in anything, there is no use at all and the respect is mutual. (479)

The father is absent: this is the meaning of there being "no shadow." As a result, no one imposes the father's instrumental consciousness. There is "no



use" in "anything," and if "the respect is mutual," no one plans to use the speaker either. He or she is back in the pre-Oedipal world of play, the world of the mother where colors, tastes, and all impressions were to be enjoyed rather than used.

Thus the speaker, or Stein herself, is "[c]laiming nothing, not claiming anything" (480). This is true in two senses: she does not try to own or use anything, but she also actively claims *nothing*, stakes out the shadow world that the symbolic order discredited or said was not there. It turns out to be a capacious world after all: "spread into nothing. Spread into nothing" (472). One of the things Stein sees herself doing throughout *Tender Buttons* is to assemble little nothings—trivial objects, fragmentary sensations—and show that they are as noteworthy as anything else.

As it turns out, a good place in which to enjoy a "vacation" from the father is the domestic sphere, the house. For this is one realm, according to Stein, that his hierarchies have trivialized or placed in shadow. Thus, paradoxically, one can do what one wants there; he has not quite occupied or regulated this space. Stein enters an imaginary house in *Tender Buttons* and never leaves it: "The author of all that is in there behind the door." So, she goes on, her job is that of "[e]xplaining darkening," showing the contours of the female world (499). She can do housework here in a lazy, noninstrumental way; we see quite a bit of undirected sweeping and polishing. And there is cooking, too, not of the boiling sort but of a kind that recreates the rich ragout of the mother. This is true metaphorically as well. Where Stein sees a "separation" of things into artificial categories, "so kept well and sectionally," the thing she does is to reintegrate everything. "Put it into the stew, put it to shame" (p. 486).

Stein's imaginative recovery of the mother in *Tender Buttons* is an extraordinary move, for in many of her earlier writings she did not seem to notice or value mothers herself. In works like *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, important fathers were ubiquitous, but for the most part the mothers were contemptible, weak, dying or simply absent. Unlike the fathers, they had no discernible effect on their children. Stein is certainly reversing some profound pattern of repression in her own mind, and discovering that the mother or mother-figures who seemed to be ciphers were important early presences covered up in the course of things.

Thus some of the most touching images in *Tender Buttons* and the companion texts are the incessant images of "filling" and "spreading." These images suggest the womb, but what they often express about it is the presence of a whole universe in what one thought of as only an absence. "So the larger size is not the last of all and the silence is larger. If there is the filling any one is there. . . . This makes all of that precious matter" (*G.M.P.*, 254). Some overlooked, silent space is actually "filling," or already full, and what it contains is "precious matter." These texts are about exploring a space that the culture calls empty—whether it is the female body or the early bond with the mother—and discovering that



something is there. The field of vision widens: "there is no empty place."<sup>21</sup> "In every space there is a hint of more" (*TB*, 505).

The maternal and anatomical themes that have been my subject emerged suddenly in Stein's work in 1911-12. Even texts composed over a number of years, like *A Long Gay Book*, are marked by a sharp break after which the new themes dominate. In the same period, Stein's life was changing in ways that, while hardly accounting for the shift in her thinking, point to a consistency between her creative life and issues that were emerging as central in her relationships with other people. The two important events of these years were Stein's alienation from her brother Leo and the beginning of her romantic and domestic life with Alice Toklas. Toklas joined the Stein household in 1909; Leo Stein made his departure from it final in 1913.<sup>22</sup> Stein's self-liberation from a brother who habitually condescended to her and disparaged her work is of a piece with the new refrain in the texts examined in these pages, to the effect that women are not to be condemned but valued.<sup>23</sup> And the relationship with Alice Toklas parallels the maternal theme; although Toklas assumes a variety of roles in Stein's works, ranging from wife to sister, one possibility explored in these texts is that of erotically rediscovering the mother through a female lover, of "climbing in the whole udder."

Whatever their source, the transformations in Stein's thinking affected everything she wrote in this period. My purpose has been to show that Stein's most obscure texts, texts that have received attention only as important stylistic experiments, are in fact filled with ideas, and that the ideas are sophisticated and coherent. We might also fairly call them feminist ideas. Stein is both more intelligible and more centrally interested in issues of gender than has been thought.

One implication of Stein's departure from Jamesian psychology is that the mental paradigm with which she replaced it enabled her to say things about women and their place in the symbolic order. In the short period between *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons*, Stein moved from a Jamesian notion of selective attention to a psychoanalytic one. By 1912, the transition was complete. The interesting fact of mental life for her was no longer that we suppress or ignore certain facts in the interest of survival — James's point — but that we *repress* aspects of experience in the interest of instituting culture. What we repress is not trivial, as James has it, but important; the very fact that we are so intent on keeping it out of view says as much. And the repressed mental content — pre-Oedipal memories, for example, or discounted impressions — can be excavated at any moment. Her final point is that among the things cast into shadow by the culture are the mother and the female body; in the texts of 1912, she uncivilizes us by bringing these back into view.

## Notes

I am indebted to Lauren Berlant, Elizabeth Helsinger, Cass R. Sunstein, and William Veeder for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. See for example Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 151–52, and Elizabeth Fifer, "Is Flesh Advisable? The Interior Theater of Gertrude Stein," *Signs* 4 (1979): 472–83.
2. For an extended discussion, see my "'Melanctha' and the Psychology of William James," *Modern Fiction Studies* 28 (1982–83): 545–56, and "William James and the Modernism of Gertrude Stein," in *Modernism Reconsidered*, ed. Robert Kiely, Harvard English Studies, No. 11 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 47–63.
3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 3 vols., in *Works of William James*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 273, 753.
4. Gertrude Stein, "Melanctha," in *Three Lives* (New York: Random House, 1909), 158.
5. Gertrude Stein, *A Long Gay Book* and *G.M.P.*, in *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein with Two Shorter Stories* (Barton, Vt.: Something Else Press, 1972); *Tender Buttons*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1962). These texts will be cited parenthetically as *LGB*, *GMP*, and *TB*. In the cases of *A Long Gay Book*, and *G.M.P.*, the issues that concern me emerge toward the end of the texts, preceded by material that resembles that of *The Making of Americans* rather than that of *Tender Buttons*.
6. Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 126.
7. I do not believe that my elision here alters the meaning; the quoted passage is part of a dependent clause beginning "If lilies are lily white. . . ."
8. Gertrude Stein, "Portrait of Constance Fletcher," *Geography and Plays* (Boston: Four Seas Press, 1922), 162. Hereafter this text will be cited as *GP*.
9. See for example *TB*, 475, 481; *LGB*, 112; *GMP*, 277.
10. Gertrude Stein, "Scenes. Actions and Disposition of Relations and Positions," *GP*, 97, 115.
11. Gertrude Stein, "Rue de Rennes," *Two: Gertrude Stein and her Brother and Other Early Portraits (1908–1912)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 349.
12. "Scenes," 106.
13. *Ibid.*, 115.
14. In "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," Susan Gubar discusses certain women writers' fantasies of writing with menstrual and other blood. *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 73–93.
15. *TB*, 496. Jayne Walker reads the phrase in a similar way; see *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from "Three Lives" to "Tender Buttons"* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 147.
16. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, eds. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 284.
17. For a fuller discussion, see Joel Porte, "Gertrude Stein and the Rhythms of Life," *New Boston Review* 1 (June 1975): 16–18.
18. *GMP*, 252. The quotations that follow are from *GMP* except where otherwise noted.
19. We know that he is a boy because of the description of his "Pecker that is red. . . .," 253.
20. For a fuller account of elements of Stein's style that are reminiscent of pre-Oedipal

consciousness, see Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), e.g., 16–17. DeKoven does not argue that Stein thinks of her style in these terms, any more than other experimental writers do. But remarkably, the *content* of these texts indicates that something like the Freudian paradigm of human development is present in Stein's mind.

21. "Scenes," 109.
22. Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 361–62.
23. See for example Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, 108, 114.

## The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein Laura Riding Jackson\*

### 1

A common, and main, propensity in attitudes to language, in this era, has been the downgrading of linguistic discipline as necessarily healthy in its effects. Words are now treated as a legacy from a benighted past, in which they were made too much of. The new educated view of words is: "They have no intrinsic value—let us not be fools over them." In this linguistic anti-traditionalism, the functional properties of words, that is, their meaning-properties, cease to hold interest. Consideration of the rationality of the use of a word has come to be viewed as pedantic piety; the new principle of use is the subservience of the word to the individual user's will—instead of your adapting yourself to it, you make it adapt itself to *you*.

The new verbal modernism—the new linguistic freedom—has two sides, one that is intellectually purposive, and one in which the desertion of discipline is by involuntary default. In the latter state of mind, people find no serious concern in themselves for care in the use of words—and there is no wondering why. The purposive, organized rejection of the values of rational coherence that words have vested in them in their belonging to a language is itself of two kinds. One kind is centered in the terminological fantasy pursued in science-serving philosophy (or, one might say, psychological philosophy). An example of this both extremely ambitious and extremely bizarre, linguistically, is to be seen in Mrs. Susanne Langer's tortuously intricate endeavor to substitute new verbal standards of meaning, derived from scientific systematism, for linguistically normal standards, such as are implicit in the systematic meaning-provisions of language itself. The other form of overthrow of natural linguistic law is centered in stands of literary daring, assumed in the interest of authorial originality and new "creative" literary developments.

\*This is a previously unpublished essay and is included here by permission of the author.