

**Taking Patriarchy out of Poetry:  
Eroticism and Subversion  
in Gertrude Stein's *Lifting Belly***

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"She" is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious—not to mention her language in which "she" goes off in all directions and in which "he" is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One".

In the above quotation, Luce Irigaray is referring to the possibility of a woman's language or way of speaking (*parler femme*) based on the specificity of the female bodily experience. Irigaray claims that a woman's sexuality is multiple, diffusive and impossible to define within western phallogocentric language. In so doing, she has been accused of biologism, repositing women on the margins of discourse and of essentialising women as irrational sexual beings. However, through her refusal of authoritative structures, her repudiation of the patriarchal economy of the same and her metonymical inclusion of the female body, I would argue that Irigaray commits herself both to undoing the mind/body split that has dominated western metaphysical thought and to rejecting the primacy of the phallus around which patriarchy is ordered.

Irigaray's quotation could equally be a summary of many responses to the work of Gertrude Stein. Stein's obscure style and her privileging of the materiality of language over its referentiality have resulted in her being regarded as largely incomprehensible. Even her own brother, Leo Stein, called her writing "nonsense" and her prose an "abomination" (Benstock 159). Moreover, a lot of criticism on Stein reduces her work to overt biography, causing her to be read as a personality rather than as a self-conscious writer so that Stein herself complained that "the Americans were more interested in me than in my work" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 50).<sup>2</sup> However, seen in context with Irigaray's concept of "*parler femme*" Stein's work could be perceived differently: "One

must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilised" ("This Sex Which is Not One" 103). What interests me about Gertrude Stein's poetry is that if it were listened to or read differently, her idiosyncratic style and love of fluidity and repetition could be seen as a refusal of rigidity and appropriation, a playful breaking of binary oppositions and an attempt to incorporate and refigure the body within the text. Rather than being regarded as an instance of Stein's eccentricity, therefore, Stein's linguistic innovations can thus be interpreted as her experimentation with a non-patriarchal language, similar to the woman's language theorised by Irigaray. To substantiate this argument I will be looking at Stein's own theories on language and *Lifting Belly*, an eroticised poem which invites a reading based on extra-textual knowledge of Stein's relationship with Alice B. Toklas. As a lesbian love poem, *Lifting Belly* self-consciously departs from traditional discourses of the erotic; as I hope to illustrate though, it is not only the subject matter of the poem that achieves a subversion of male-dominated constructions of desire but, additionally, Stein's stylistic disruptions which seem to me fundamental to her cloaked expression of a lesbian identity.

Where Stein significantly rejects traditional authorial conventions is in her relinquishment of ownership over her texts: the fundamental relationship in her writing is not between the author and the work but between the text and the reader. Roland Barthes has argued that "the text is experienced only in an activity of production" and Stein demanded the same readerly participation to make up the meaning of her work (157). Her sparse use of punctuation, for example, presents a challenge which provokes collaboration on the part of the reader, hence her dislike of the comma: "A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living life as actively as you should lead it ... . A long complicated sentence should force itself on you, make yourself know yourself knowing it" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures 1909-45* 131). Stein here equates the comma with a mother helping her child but elsewhere she seems to consider the rules and prohibitions of grammar as a patriarchal construction indeed. In *Arthur, A Grammar*, as Shari Benstock points out (185), grammar is gendered male while style is frivolously female with the sentence joining both principles together in the wedlock of meaning: "A sentence refers to wedding, weddings" (Stein, *How to Write* 72). Moreover, grammar is figured as an authoritative structure that imposes division and sameness by forcing meaning through its laws: "Grammar is resemblance and with proper preparation is certain of dividing half and half" (ibid.:59). In a poem tellingly called *Patriarchal Poetry*, Stein also claims that "Patriarchal Poetry is obtained with seize" (*The Yale Gertrude Stein* 139).<sup>3</sup> She thus pre-empts contemporary feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in their analysis of language as a construction founded on the phallogocentric assumptions of appropriation, naming and a violent imposition of

sameness rather than an inclusion of differences and otherness: "Patriarchal Poetry in pieces. Pieces which have left it as names which have left it as names to to all said all said as delight" (ibid.:145).

In her own conceptualisation of poetry, Stein refuses the empowering act of naming and the fracturing of language into rigid grammatical structures, asserting that "Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 138). Stein attempts to tease out the rigidity of the noun and, in "caressing" it, she engages the body in writing. This sentence is also a self-reflexive comment on its own construction in that Stein replaces the noun with present participles, "ceaselessly embracing words" (to quote Irigaray), creating a fluctuating, ebbing rhythm which mimetically demonstrates what Stein is defining. Stein's love of what she termed the "continuous present" stemmed not only from the immediacy of perception it demands from the reader but also from its resistance to the fixity and teleological effect intrinsic to a linear narrative framework: "I could not free myself from the present participle because dimly I felt that I had to know what I knew and I knew that the beginning and middle and ending was not where I began" (*Narration* 24). In Stein's work, time is subjectively rather than objectively ordered, hence her employment of repetition, cyclical patterns, and her refusal of narrative closure. In *Lifting Belly*, for example, Stein writes "Do you think that said yesterday / Yes today" (*YGS* 9), where "today", "yesterday", the past and present tenses are left hovering in contradiction, mirroring Stein's claim that "There should not be a sense of time, but an existence suspended in time" ("A Transatlantic Interview—1945" 20). This also parallels Julia Kristeva's assertion in "Women's Time" that female subjectivity is linked to cyclical (repetitive) and monumental (eternal) temporalities, due to woman's proximity to birth and reproduction, whereas men are more closely allied to the linear time of history, politics, language and death (*The Kristeva Reader* 190-93). Stein may not have overtly related her preference of repetition over linear structures to her femaleness in the manner Kristeva is theorising, but she was most self-consciously breaking with the norms she critiques in *Patriarchal Poetry*. In fact, regardless of the sex of the writer, Julia Kristeva considers all experimental language to be anti-patriarchal in its advocacy of multiplicity over singularity, the dominance of the signifier over the signified and the fragmentation of the ordered and unitary language of the symbolic:

However, in a culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as masters of their speech, they have what is called a "phallic" position. The fragmentation of language in a text calls into question the very posture of this mastery. The writing we have been discussing [experimental writing] confronts this phallic position either to traverse it or deny it. (*New French Feminisms* 165)

Stein's experimentations with language and her refusal to master the text

took place largely through fragmentations, repetitions and cyclical patterns but Stein also recognised that nothing repeated could ever be the same. Her famous phrase “a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” is not merely an amusing, rhythmic tautology: rather, with each “rose”, the rose somehow appears less rosy and the sign “rose” seems increasingly divorced from its referent. Stein viewed such repetition as a form of insistence and emphasis, characteristic of all life, history and nature and she claimed that “if it is really alive it is never saying anything in the same way because emphasis can never be the same not even when it is most the same that is when it has been taught” (*Narration v*).

The idea of language being alive is central to Stein’s theories on writing. What interested her was language as a medium; its textures, patterns and the materiality of words. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, for example, Stein wrote “I don’t hear a language, I hear tones of voices and rhythm, but with my eyes I see words and sentences” (77). Like most modernists of the period, Stein rejected the realist insistence upon an alleged objectivity and the notion of language as a transparent medium representing a concrete external world. However, Stein also challenged the notion of language as system of referentiality and experimented with weakening the assumed relationship between signifier and signified, thus forcing the reader to engage with her work and attend to language as a medium. This does not mean that Stein’s work is devoid of meaning. On the contrary, Stein believed it was impossible to write without signification—disconnectedness just made each individual word more important: “I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and I put them next to another word and at the same time found very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense” (*YGS xxii*).

This notion of playing with words reveals how for Stein words were just as much a medium as paints or clay and explains her fascination with the cubists, who broke with the notion of art as direct representation and distorted their work in order to intensify and clarify visual effects. Similar to the cubists, what Stein achieved in allowing language its free-play was a proliferation of possible meaning without the imposition of a definitive interpretation. This has led to two basic readings of Gertude Stein’s work. Richard Kostelanetz, for example, claims that Stein severed the relation between signifier and signified in her preoccupation with the materiality of language; he argues that in Stein’s work “words became autonomous, objects rather than symbols of something else, for they are themselves, rather than windows onto other terrain” (*ibid.*:xxi). More recent work within feminist or queer theory, however, has claimed that Stein’s writing embodied a private language that forged a voice for the expression of lesbian desire and eroticism. Indeed, Shari Benstock, who at one point declares that Stein “submitted her will to a linguistic power play that she recognised” is later forced to contradict herself when she writes that “Her writing denied the claims of intelligibility enforced by patriarchal language through an encoding lesbianism as its secret heart” (159, 188). A code, by

definition, signifies extra-textual content and requires an assertion of will on the part of the writer.

Rather than ironing out this contradiction, however—something that would risk homogenising Stein’s work and lose sight of her love of contradictions—it seems to me that a double gesture is at work in Stein’s writing: extra-textual meaning is simultaneously evoked and under constant erasure. In *Lifting Belly*, for example, the reader may feel s/he has conquered the “code” in working out that “cow” is Stein’s code for female orgasm but the text still evades total mastery to the extent that Lillian Faderman, somewhat reductively, claims that one needs biographical information to decipher this author’s work (399). More often than not, Stein’s writing resists comprehensive deciphering because she deliberately frustrates readerly expectations and in so doing prevents her texts from being appropriated into a singular meaning. In fact, the final line of *Lifting Belly* reads “In the midst of writing there is merriment”, so that Stein may seduce the reader into believing s/he has construed the “code” in *Lifting Belly* but then dislodges any assertion of power over the text and playfully informs the reader that her poem will remain elusive (YGS 54).

This is not to underestimate the difficulties of writing lesbian experiences at the time Stein was writing and the need for an encoded language of lesbian eroticism. Lillian Faderman assures us that Stein was perfectly aware of censorship when she told Hemmingway that his story *Up in Michigan* would be refused publication and that there was “no point in such a work” (399). The Radclyffe Hall court hearing in 1928, and the judge’s damning indictment of Radclyffe Hall’s failure to stigmatise “the relationship as in any way blame-worthy”, illustrates the dangers inherent in writing explicit lesbian desire at the beginning of the century (Weeks 117). Moreover, how could one write something for which no language had yet been established? Did a lesbian author mask her relationships in heterosexual terms like Natalie Barney, write an explicit narrative of pity and resilience as with Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, or did she allow her lesbian experiences to hover on the margins of discourse and manifest themselves through stylistic innovations and ambiguities as did Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield?

*Lifting Belly* seems a response to that very problematic; it is a poem which by repudiating “patriarchal poetry” and disclosing the inadequacies of conventional language both expresses eroticised lesbian desire and incorporates the body in the text. In fact the sexual and textual are indivisibly entwined when we are informed that “Lifting belly is a language” (YGS 17) and when one of the voices in the poem claims: “Lifting belly and kind. / This is the pencil for me” (ibid.:28). The pen has often been associated with the penis or phallus in western thought,<sup>4</sup> but Stein undermines this formulation by equating the pencil—a less authoritative writing instrument than the pen—with the lesbian sexual act of lifting belly, thus subverting the supremacy of the phallus. This insistence on the need to write the body also draws close parallels with the work of the contemporary French theorist Hélène Cixous, the advocator of *écriture*

*feminine*. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” which, as the title suggests, privileges the bodily, non-verbal laugh over phallogocentric language, Cixous urges women to write themselves and allow the body to be heard: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (250). Similarly, Stein writes that “Lifting belly needs to speak”, where the bodily act of lifting belly is posited as the speaking subject, an effect which unsettles the mind/body binary opposition of western metaphysical thought that has consistently been gendered and hierarchised as masculine/feminine. Placing the female body in direct relationship with language thus helps undermine the Cartesian discourse on which patriarchal authority is predicated. Stein never singularly defines “lifting belly” but one thing is for sure – this poem is ordered around the woman’s belly, not the phallus.

Instead of giving one binding definition of “lifting belly”, Stein produces a proliferation of names that never fully satisfy thus refusing closure. The feigned attempts at clarification shift and contradict so that “lifting belly” is simultaneously “a name”, “an occasion”, “a picnic”, “a quotation”, “a reflection” and “an occupation I enjoy”, to name but a few. Harriet Chessman writes of the two characters in the poem: “Because they are already within ‘Lifting belly’ they have no need to define it, or make its appearance at any moment visible” (104). This is a perceptive point but perhaps “lifting belly” will always exceed definition. Indeed, Stein warns the reader against an arrogant assertion of ownership over the text and the impossibility of extracting a definitive meaning from the poem when she writes in the middle of *Lifting Belly*:

You are so sure you know the meaning of any word.  
 Leave me to see.  
 Pink.  
 my pink. (YGS 35)

The “you” suddenly seems directed at the reader and the esoteric “pink” which follows is deliberately placed after this warning to emphasise the futility of attempting to master the text. Pink may evoke femininity, comfort and the female genitals, but unconfirmed guesses are all the reader is allowed.

Naming, then, in Stein’s poetics, never fully captures but always leaves an excess: she approximates “lifting belly” but never fixes it. Definitions of “lifting belly” are no sooner given than replaced so that it becomes a non-specified, all-consuming sexual act that blurs identities within its lovemaking. Lifting belly “connects”, “squeezes” and “seeks pleasure” (ibid.:23, 14, 49). Thus, I would argue that Stein is using metonymy rather than metaphor. Whereas metaphor depends on substitution and replacement, metonymy works by contiguity and displacement, so that, for Luce Irigaray, the language of desire and metonymy frees itself from the logocentric, patriarchal world of presence and naming and, instead, promotes dissemination and multiplicity. In her work *This Sex Which is Not One* she asserts the need to impugn the “privilege granted to metaphor (a quasi-solid) over metonymy (which is much more closely allied to fluids)” (110).

By employing metonymy, Stein guarantees that the connotations which “lifting belly” conjures up are open-ended and permanently in flux, as she simultaneously reveals and conceals the erotic content of the poem. *Lifting Belly* thus illustrates the Lacanian equation between language and desire; for Lacan, language is always marked by desire and is consequently underpinned by a lack that undermines the hegemony of the phallus. Furthermore, Lacan once claimed that “desire is a metonymy”, because, in exactly the same way that meaning is constantly deferred along a chain of signifiers, desire also resists the closure of definition or fulfillment (175).

By refusing to fix meaning within language therefore, Stein leaves desire hovering within the text. The word “cow”, for example, undergoes constant shifts in meaning: it suggests food, protection, nurture, the female sexual organ and, most commonly, female orgasm: “I say lifting belly again and Caesar’s again. I say lifting belly and I say Caesars and I say lifting belly Caesars and cow come out” (*YGS* 30). The word “Caesar” is also under constant displacement; referring to the dominant voice in the poem, it also plays with its phonetic equivalent “seize her” as in the above case. Stein thus privileges touch over the visual and in so doing undermines male discourses of the erotic; she sings unashamed praises to the female body, but also refigures that very body through her sliding metonymical associations, which refuse the fragmentation of the female body that male discourses enact through their fetishisation of specific bodily parts or their objectification of the female body. Stein’s refusal of fixity also repudiates the teleological effect of satisfaction or completion and falls in with Irigaray’s notion of female sexual pleasure: “Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion: openness is never spent nor sated” (*This Sex Which is Not One* 210). Desire in Stein’s text exceeds definition remaining, at the same time, definitively unfulfilled, so that the decentering of the poem and its rhythmic and textual return to “lifting belly” suggest an act that can never attain the closure of invoking a stable extra-textual referent.

All we can be sure of is that we are in the midst of a lover’s discourse where the speakers remain unnamed. It is tempting to supply the text with biographical information, to “decode” it and attribute the two voices to Stein and Alice B. Toklas, but the reader can never be certain to whom the shifting “I” belongs. Moreover, this would be a reductive reading of a poem where the lack of speech demarcations and the dialogic structure allow for an inclusive sense of self and other, based on proximity rather than the self-definition and division that two speaking subjects would imply. Dialogue, as opposed to monologue, offers an alternative to a masculine assertion of presence and a privileging of one voice over the other with the result that Stein’s text evokes an incredible sense of intimacy and mutuality. Within this dialogic exchange, Stein creates a warm, safe place in language; there is no absence where anger, or even the male, might fit and no desire outside the text. Friends or acquaintances may be named, but they are extra to the relationship, so that “lifting belly” is always

re-invoked:

You mean Vera.  
Lifting belly can guess.  
Quickly.  
Lifting belly is so pleased. (YGS 49)

The inclusive nature of the poem even allows the argumentative voice that occasionally punctures the dialogue its say, and contradictions are not elided but contained within the text to the extent that one voice can ask: “Do I look fat and thin” (ibid.:47). However, at other times, Stein also seems to be conveying such intense mutuality between the voices that identities collapse into each other:

She is my sweetheart.  
Why doesn't she resemble another.  
This I cannot say. (ibid.:31)

In this quotation the operative term is “another” rather than “the other” but the text does voice a certain defensiveness as if in dialogue with accusations articulated in mainstream lesbianism as a narcissistic inability to differentiate the self. Defensiveness also lingers on the margins of the text in one of the final lines. One voice claims “I need protection” (ibid.:35), which is picked up and echoed:

Protection.  
Protection.  
Protection.  
Speculation.  
Protection.  
Protection. (ibid.:54).

Built inside the layers of protection there is the vague threat of “speculation”, so that in a poem that privileges touch over the appropriative gaze, Stein exhibits a certain awareness of how the female body and lesbianism have been fetishised within western culture.

A number of critics tend to overlook this hint of vulnerability. Instead, Stein is viewed as appropriating Alice's voice both textually and biographically. Catherine Stimpson, for example, accuses Stein of male usurpation claiming that the author “casually, but consistently, appropriates Alice's voice” (6). Certainly, Stein exploits the non-specificity of the first person personal pronoun, even writing Alice's autobiography for her. But to see this as simple usurpation seems to me a rather simplistic analysis. Not only does *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* subvert the assertion of presence common to autobiography and destabilise autobiography's masking of the temporal gap between the narrating



and the narrated “I”, but also most of the humour of the work depends on the twist of Stein praising herself in the voice of another. Rather than seeing Stein’s use of Alice as persona, as a simple act of aggressive usurpation, it seems to me that what Stein achieves is a playful disruption of the stability of the subject.

Neither should Stein’s playfulness be forgotten in her use of the roles of husband and wife. Catherine Stimpson regards such use of heterosexual conventions as Stein’s assertion of power within the relationship and concludes that “Stein never ceased to believe in bourgeois heterosexuality; its decencies, norms and families” (ibid.:4). The problem with Stimpson’s reading, however, is that she attributes the same power dynamics of institutionalised heterosexuality to a lesbian relationship. Furthermore, as far as *Lifting Belly* is concerned, this seems a reductive approach to a poem where roles of husband and wife are invoked, but rarely without merriment or subversion. For example, Stein reverses sexual roles in the line “Husband obey your wife” which is later followed by:

Darling wifie is so good.  
Little husband would.  
Be so good.  
If he could.  
This was said.  
Now we know how to differ.  
From that.  
Certainly.  
No we say.  
Little hubbie is good.  
Everyday. (YGS 47, 49)

In recent developments within feminist and queer theory the attributing of heterosexual roles within a gay or lesbian relationship has been seen as subversive, in that it signifies sexual identity to be a performance rather than an ontological category. Judith Butler, for instance, argues that gender can neither be constructed as a stable identity nor as a locus of agency; rather, it is a stylised performance that has no original (140). For Butler, therefore, any use of heterosexual roles within a lesbian relationship is not only a site of eroticisation, but it also exposes the imitative structure of gender identity: “The idea that butch and femme are in some sense ‘replicas’ or ‘copies’ of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled” (ibid.: 123). This is certainly true of *Lifting Belly*, where the roles of husband and wife are assumed within erotic play but thereafter denaturalised. Stein even presents these roles as fluid and interchangeable: “Please be the man / I am the man” (YGS 51). It is therefore significant that Stein prefaces her overt lesbian novel *Q.E.D.* with a quotation from *As You Like It*, a play in which gender is reduced to a set of clothes when Phebe falls in love with Rosalind when she is dressed like a man. But it is not only gender as a

stable category that is subjected to critique within Stein's work; the exclusionary, oppositional categories of "man" and "woman" are also questioned:

What is a man.  
What is a woman.  
What is a bird. (ibid.:32)

This questioning of the ontological operations of gender and Stein's awareness of the constructed nature of sexual roles, certainly puts Gertrude Stein well ahead of her time and in line with postmodern deconstructions of the subject and sexual identity. Stein's determination to undermine accepted authorial conventions, her attempts to break binary oppositions, her dispersal of the univocity of the signifier and her subversion of male-constructed discourses of the erotic also result in a poetics far removed from the restraints of "patriarchal poetry". Stein herself never specifically related her experimentation with language to her identity as a woman or lesbian, but her awareness of the authoritative, phallogocentric structures that underpin language caused her to forge a means of expression that falls in with contemporary feminist thinking.

Consequently, in a cyclical, Steinian fashion, I would like to end this paper as I began, with a quotation from Irigaray whose description of a possible feminine syntax in *This Sex Which is Not One* could equally be my own interpretation of Stein's work, and in my opinion confirms Gertrude Stein's status as a feminist writer and theorist affirming:

that syntax would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation. (134)

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### Notes

1. Wherever possible I have used Claudia Reeder's translation rather than Catherine Porter's. See Works Cited.
2. For examples of biographical readings of Stein's work see J. Brinnin, D. Souhami, and E. Sprigge.
3. Subsequent references to *The Yale Gertrude Stein* are from here on cited in the text under the entry YGS.
4. See Gilbert and Gubar, 5-7.

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