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Poetry and Translatability
Or: Gertrude Stein, the Foreigner

“Estrangeiro aqui como em toda a parte”

(bilingual Fernando Pessoa in his native Lisbon)

Western culture is founded on untranslatability. This may sound like a paradox, if you think of the long tradition of *translatio studii* or *translatio imperii* in the culture, or if you just ponder the very word *tradition*. Tradition, from Latin *tradere* (‘hand over’), implies a process of communication, transmission, and transference that necessarily allows for the transformation, whether in terms of “losses” or “gains,” usually associated with what we consensually mean by translation. And yet, the truth is that the concept of untranslatability grounds one of the major pillars of the Western canon — the Judeo-Christian Bible. The principle is common to other monotheistic religious systems. The concept of untranslatability basically translates itself (if I’m allowed to relish the paradox) into the idea that god is untranslatable.

The Biblical story is well known. It has two main chapters: chapter one, Babel; chapter two, the Pentecost. In Genesis, the Almighty creates the different human languages to colonize an upstart humanity and thus secure the untranslatability of his own divinity. In the Acts of the Apostles, the miracle of total intelligibility, because it is a *miracle* and not a first instance of simultaneous translation, transcends language difference, and hence humanity, and thus once again presupposes and guarantees the ungraspable ideal of god’s absolute meaning. The Babelic confusion of languages imposed by a jealous god, on the one hand, and the gift of the Holy Ghost in the Pentecostal cloven tongues of fire granted by a proselytizing god, on the other, both tell the same story of imperial identity and subjugated otherness. One single language is good, for it bespeaks the untouchable self-sameness of the deity;

many languages are bad, for they bespeak the conflicting diversity of humankind and thus preclude community. Indeed, under this Judeo-Christian conception, the sense of community depends on the assumption of the transcendent meaning of god's all-encompassing ur-language. The wondrous creativity of secular languages, best observed in poetry, is but the ever frustrated *attempt* at speaking total meaning. This one supreme language — Walter Benjamin called it “die reine Sprache” — is supposedly what grounds the possibility of a meaningful community. Elsewhere I have suggested that it is really the other way around: the confusion of languages, and not the appropriation of human tongues by the Spirit, is what gives rise to the idea of and need for community.¹ According to the Biblical myths of language, meaning is only possible in the word of god. Community is impossible in any other, or foreign, language. No wonder many poets, particularly women poets, often envision themselves as “thieves of language.” Some of them, however, call the absolute meaning of this one foreign-less word of god, the silence of god (Carolyn Forché). In the beginning was silence. The word is with the human being. Being human is the word. To be human is to break god's silence and loudly speak the “foreign” languages of the multiverse community of men and women. Thus grounded, translation, as it is commonly understood in our field, cannot but always be a multidirectional process. This phenomenon I call, on another level, intertranslatability. To translate is not to say the *same* thing in another tongue, but to make manifest a *different* thing. This may sound close to what we used to call “the impossibility of translation,” a concept that does not translate the, to me, *impossible* concept of untranslatability. To my mind, intertranslatability is what defines cultures as, necessarily, *cultures-in-relation*.

The only nonforeign language there is, therefore, is the silence of god. Humankind deals with foreignness. Language is always foreign. Culture is always foreign. Place is always foreign. This is lucidly acknowledged by the Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa when he says of his native Lisbon, “Here, as elsewhere, I am foreign.” The original line I used above as epigraph (*Estrangeiro aqui como em toda a parte*) is taken from “Lisbon Revisited, 1926.” A few years

¹ Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, “Speaking in Tongues.” *Literatura e pluralidade cultural*, ed. Isabel Allegro de Magalhães et al. (Lisboa: Colibri, 1999) 433-40.

later, in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), another modernist poet, the American Wallace Stevens, expressed the same feeling in a different way, fully spelling out the idea that human making, or poetry, springs from this feeling of radical otherness. Says Stevens, “From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days” (the misleadingly soothing silence of god is clearly audible in the poet’s “blazoned days”). The logical consequence must be drawn that to be in language, culture or place is to be compelled constantly to engage in endless acts of translation. It is our human prerogative to make the foreignness we live in our own. We become part of our world precisely by voicing our utter foreignness: “Tom-tom c’est moi,” Stevens noisily boasts in another poem, “I am a native in this world.” But he also grants: “We are the mimics,” the poet’s performance being like an act of translation. Poets are translators even though there is no “original.”

To be a native in this world, to be part of this world’s community of human beings, is humbly to acknowledge the vulnerability of being foreign, accept being constantly translated and mistranslated, and take on the responsibility of translating and inevitably mistranslating. Pessoa’s term for this condition is “disquietude.” Pessoa’s disquietude may be read as a mistranslation of the heteronymic fiction, and both (heteronymy and disquietude), as the poet’s awareness of humanity’s utmost foreignness. The poet, or maker, as faker (in “Autopsychography”) is the aptest figuration of the modern-day transgressor of linguistic and cultural boundaries (the classical “traduttore traditore”), and of what one loses and gains by trespassing without the safety net of god’s ur-Language-of-All-Meaning. Pessoa’s poetic theory and practice best exemplify the modern poet’s realization that comforting identity, or self-sameness, does not exist at all (except, I might cautiously add after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, strategically). What the poet is left with is the sheer materiality of language and the dangerous excitement of intertranslatability. Other names. Heteronyms. Intercommunal difference. Parallel creation. Foreignness. The performance of Pessoa’s poetic work as a whole ironically displays the *Mystery* (Pessoa’s term) of meaning. Not meaninglessness, but *the other side of meaning*, or language-as-materiality. At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schlegel spoke of *Unverständlichkeit* [Incomprehensibility]. Pessoa’s *Desassossego* [Disquietude] is perhaps the best term of all to characterize modernity’s deeper loss

of grounds for meaning in its utmost consciousness of the resounding opacity of language. To be sure, such perception would not be possible without Nietzsche's sonorous proclamation of the death of god. If you don't know Chinese, and spend one day in China surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a local market, you finally realize, utterly godless that you are, that language is nothing but a dense mass of sounds, external noise, impenetrable materiality.

As George Steiner pointed out many years ago, contrary to the romantic fiction of the poet's at-homeness in language, the modernist poet is "variously" at home.² He, or as we shall see even more so *she*, is a stranger in the world and reinvents the very idea of language in every poem she or he writes anew. The modernist poet's spacial and linguistic location is "extraterritorial." Language is no longer a mysterious holder of transcendent meaning never to be reached, but rather a material means, a tool, an instrument for the construction of *meanings*. "Only he that is not at home inside a language," Steiner quotes Theodor Adorno as having said of Heinrich Heine, "uses it as an instrument." To Adorno's Heine, Steiner adds many examples of cosmopolitan, multi-language-sensitive poets of our modernity, including Oscar Wilde, Ezra Pound, Samuel Becket, Vladimir Nabokov. But no poet has ever more eloquently expressed foreignness as the human condition of modernity than Gertrude Stein. A poet and a woman (an impossible feat in itself, according to her contemporary Sigmund Freud), but also a doubly deracinated American and a Jew (a sexist Jew, one might add), and a Lesbian to boot, Stein writes in English deliberately like a "foreigner." Her life trajectory, no less than her perception of American culture, of which she considered herself to be the genius in the twentieth century, accounts to a large extent for her extraordinary achievement as a modernist poet. Stein, the verbal artist, moved in her contemporary culture not just as a "master of repetition" (as I've called her elsewhere borrowing a phrase by Stevens), but as the master transgressor of all boundaries: national, sexual, cultural, and aesthetic. As she went from poetry to painting, from science to mass culture, from female to male, indeed, as she translated and opened herself to translation from painting to poetry, from mass culture to science, from male to female, Gertrude Stein appears as the

² George Steiner, "Extraterritorial." In his *Extraterritorial. Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

radical cross-dresser of language, culture, and history, and is emblematic of the modern artist's promiscuous foreignness. The simplified, insanely repetitive limpidity of Stein's writing points forcefully to the sound integrity of the words independent of concatenated meaning, and becomes strange in its easy accessibility. Childlike, repetitive simplicity sounds like rudimentary translation of some ungraspable complexity, becomes alien for that very reason, and begs for translation in turn.

The best tribute to Stein's exasperatingly exacting writing came from her fellow modernist poet Marianne Moore in a striking title: "Perspicuous Opacity." The limpid transparency, or *perspicuity*, of endless variable repetitions of simple words that structure her texts speak nothing more than the obscurity, or *opacity*, of their claiming to be the visible sound of clear solid words. This is precisely how Stein explains she wishes to be read: "I found that any kind of a book if you read with glasses and somebody is cutting your hair and so you cannot keep the glasses on and you use your glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by word makes the writing that is not anything be something" (*The Geographical History of America*, 1936). Until this is understood, many Stein readers with intense interpretive cravings may find themselves in the position of a deranged Ahab, stubbornly wishing to strike at knowledge through an impenetrable epistemological mask. In other words, meaning has to be translated into the language out of the maddening experience of life as a repetitious intertranslatability of what was never there in the first place.

Gertrude Stein, American poet of the first half of the twentieth century, lived outside the United States, mostly in Paris, all her life. The child of nineteenth-century immigrant Jews who were instantly rewarded with prosperity in the New World, Stein benefited enormously from her affluent Jewish American family's belief in travel and cultural mobility as education. Her monumental *The Making of Americans* (1925) is the story of the rising of Stein's immigrant family in America, including the story of herself as a writer, written from the vantage point of the author as reverse immigrant. The very same year she was born, Stein's family moved back to Europe, first to Austria, where she learned German along with English. In 1878, her mother took her and her siblings to Paris, where she also learned French. In the 1880's and 1890's, Stein lived in the United States, and became finally immersed in

the English language. But the first English she heard there would often have been incorrectly spoken by some of the members of her immigrant family. This early contact with different languages and the sense of what can or cannot be “correctly” done with them no doubt affected her development as a verbal artist. Later, publishers would often comment on the English “errors” made by this highly educated American author writing in France, and candidly offer to have her syntax and grammar revised. What they could not understand was that Stein, the modernist American poet, highly educated at Harvard’s Radcliff College, made herself deliberately *not at home* in the English language. Stein’s concept of “language” and “culture” is closely related to her sense of her own identity as a citizen of the newest nation in the world, in the very act of creating its language from the point of view of language difference. *The Making of Americans* is Stein’s large, multitudinous book about American identity and difference. A continuous present using everything and beginning again, “irritating annoying stimulating” that it is, it can, however, be said to be, like the American nation itself, “unreadable,” as so many good readers have testified (Edmund Wilson, Paul Bowles, Truman Capote), including Gertrude Stein herself in “Composition as Explanation:” “I . . . was a little troubled with it when I read it. I became then like the others who read it . . . I lost myself in it again.” The contemporaneity of American time that *The Making of Americans* wishes to depict *happens* in unbearable successions of paragraphs made up of repetitive sentences that seem to repeat themselves only because they stumble on each other, constantly interrupting themselves. One of the effects of Stein’s self-interruptive repetition is the utter foreignness of language, as if for ever calling for self-defeating translation, as if stuttering repetition alone could, translation-like, allow for mutual intelligibility. The sheer size of the book, almost one thousand pages of continuous present, adds a Whitmanian dimension to Stein’s epic of the American (meaning *modern*) consciousness. I give you below a sample of Stein on being’s acculturation in America. Though the American nation as a multicultural society was not yet a concept in Stein’s time, her repetitive, self-interruptive writing reveals her perception of America’s variety and reads like consecutive translations of different experiences of modern life, what she calls “being existing.”

Certainly some were certain that any one understanding the meaning in his being existing would be liking that thing. Some were certain and then later were certain that this was not what every one understanding the meaning of his being one being existing would be feeling. Some were certain that any one understanding the being in him would be liking his being one being existing. Some of such of them were learning in being ones going on being living that some could be understanding the being in him and would then be ones not liking that thing not liking his being one being existing.

Stein's wilful foreignness in the culture accounts for her extraordinary revolution in the arts of language. After Gertrude Stein, language, poetry, art, even science, could never be conceived of in the same way again (all her life she knew how to use well her excellent training in science). Stein radically upset all our comforting distinctions and categories, whether aesthetic or scientific, for classifying and cataloguing knowledge. "Knowledge is what one knows," she provocatively states in "What is English Literature" (1935). That is why promiscuous Stein will be always difficult to categorize, as a perfunctory look at any history of modern American literature will show: is she better discussed under narrative fiction, lyric poetry, drama, or perhaps the theoretical essay? Can one, in Stein, rigorously distinguish one genre from the others? Is *The Geographical History of America* a work of prose or poetry? And how useful are the categories of gender, class and ethnicity, biography and autobiography to discuss Stein's work? In the recent Library of America two-volume *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century* (2000) Stein is canonized as a modernist poet, but at least one reviewer was shocked by the amount of space (40 pages) granted to excerpts from *Tender Buttons* and "Lifting Belly," two of the extremely original love poems she dedicated to her lifelong companion, lover, and homemaker Alice B. Toklas.

Students and readers in general will continue to have trouble not only classifying Stein's writing but also counting her in. Like many modernist poets, but in a far more radical way, Stein's practice not only challenges the conventional categories of the literary tradition, but also subverts English grammar and questions cultural and social mores. Although she often designates her works by such well-established

nomenclature as “novel,” “play,” “poetry,” “poem,” “story,” “lecture,” or even the less common “portrait,” the truth is that any resemblance between Stein’s works so designated and the genres and subgenres of literary convention as normally taught in school may well be deemed pure coincidence. Take the concept of “play,” for instance, as it appears in *What Happened, A Five Act Play* (written in 1913, first published in *Geography and Other Plays* [1922]). Even though the text is appropriately divided into 5 acts and called “A Play,” the scanty four pages of the piece have no dramatic content whatsoever and bear no resemblance to any known theatrical composition. There are no characters, no stage directions, no dialogue, no action. But there is certainly the play *act-ing*, or rather writing-as-acting. “What Happened,” indeed, except the play-full written text on the page?

Apparently in lieu of identified or identifiable speakers, on the left handside of the page the text provides italicized numerical indications as if to identify or specify parts of the discourse: “(One.),” “(Five.),” “(Two.),” “(Two.),” “(Three.)” (in act one); “(Three.),” “(The same three.),” “(The same three.)” (act two); “(Two.),” “(Four.),” “(One.)” (act three); “(Four and four more.)” (act four); “(Two.)” (act five). But what are these signs, these stage nondirections, signaling? The number of paragraphs that follow? This hypothesis makes sense if you count the paragraphs in Acts I, II, III, and V. Then, it does seem as if words, language, discourse dressed up as and impersonating paragraphs are the characters in the play (In *How to Write* [1931] Stein “made a discovery that [she] considered fundamental,” as she explains in her lecture on “Plays,” “that sentences are not emotional and that paragraphs are”). But, in Act IV, what the reader has managed to construct as a comforting convention, after what she begins to believe Stein’s peculiar private conception of a literary genre might be, falls apart. “(Four and four more.)” contains indeed four paragraphs, which are followed, not by four more paragraphs, but by one long single paragraph that is made up of one long single sentence. There is a certain impudence in Stein’s demonstrations that literary conventions and conventional literary namings are precisely that: mere literary conventions. Since there is no right correspondence between the sounds and the meanings of the word that designate them, they must be reinvented for the sheer pleasure of poetic making. Readers faced with a composition that has “neither a beginning nor an end,” who wish to know “what happened,” have

to fall into the trap of Stein's whimsical playfulness and, as before a Cubist painting, yield to the temptation to "reconstruct" the "play."

In a short piece titled simply "Play" (1923), later included in *Portraits and Prayers* (1934), Gertrude Stein plays with (or intertranslates) all possible meanings and implications of the word "play" (including those of its French equivalent, *pièce*) suggesting that life is merely repetitive, fragmentary, play-as-enactment. Its first three sentences read like this: "Play, play every day, play and play and play away, and then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it. Play it, and remember it and ask to play it. Play it, and play it and play away." Then, the text offers different kinds of justification for the repeated imperative: "Certainly every one wants you to play," "That's the way to play," "This is the way to play," "Every one is very glad to have them play." Next, comes the act of playing, convened by Stein's famous present participle, as what is surely happening:

Every one is certain that some of them are playing, playing and playing and playing every day and all day and to-day. Every one is certain that some of them are playing and remembering and playing again again what they were playing. Some of them are certainly playing, playing, playing. Every one is wanting some of them to be playing and playing and playing, to be playing to-day, to be playing all day, to be playing every day, to be playing away.

In this light, Stein's *What Happened, A Five Act Play*, presenting itself as static play-on-the-page, is a challenging invitation to translation into theatrical production: the production must make the piece perform, not what happened, but the happening in the present that it wishes to be. We realize that *What Happened* is a play only because Stein says so ("I think and always have thought," Stein writes in her lecture on "Plays," "that if you write a play you ought to announce that it is a play. And that is what I did. What Happened. A Play"). *What Happened* is indeed paradigmatic of Stein's modernist reinvention of the genre by minimizing character and story or action, and putting all the emphasis on what she calls "geography" or "landscape" (Stevens calls it "climate") and some would call "the lyric." Here is an alliterative

paragraph from act II, rich with suggestions of travel and foreign linkages, and crying for translation: “A connection, a clam cup connection, a survey, a ticket and a return to laying over.” The poetic, playful quality of the text disengaged from immediate meaning is what is important and has paradoxically inspired productions. For obvious reasons, stagings of Stein’s plays have not been abundant. While there have been successful productions of the more ostensibly dramatic plays, such as *The Mother of Us All* (on Susan B. Anthony) or *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Stein’s static plays have attracted such innovative directors, with an interest in the dramatic potential of essentially lyric texts, as composer Virgil Thompson, Living Theatre’s Julian Beck, or Obie prize-winner Lawrence Kornfeld. A memorable production of *What Happened* was the “Dance Drama” performed by the Judson Poet’s Theatre at The Judson Memorial Church in New York City in 1963, directed by Lawrence Kornfeld, with music by Al Carmines, and design by Larry Siegel. In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag describes this production as “the closest thing to theatre of cruelty that we have.”

Stein’s radical innovation in creative writing cannot be dissociated from the transformations of science and the arts in the early twentieth-century western culture. “Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind of the century,” Stein immodestly announces in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). Her salon in rue des Fleurus hosted artists and scientists, as well as poets and critics. Picasso was a close friend, and so was Alfred Whitehead. Stein moved easily from one milieu to the other. While modern science was raising questions about the reality of science itself, modern art was raising questions about clear-cut distinctions between art and not art. Post-symbolist experiments with time, space, and perspective, Primitivism, Cubism, and the promiscuity of art and consumption as in Duchamp’s ready-mades turned the distinction between high art and mass culture, elite production and bourgeois consumption, gratuitous art and advertising, once and for all, into a matter of social convention. In other words, pictures “commenced to want to leave their frames” (Stein in *Picasso*). As scientists were discovering troublesome new relations between the subject observing and the object observed, a painter like Picasso was struggling, according to Stein, “not to express what he could see but not to express the things he did not see, that is to say the things everybody is certain of seeing, but which they do not really see.” Stein

claims to have been the only one to understand Picasso in his Cubist period (at the beginning of which he painted her famous portrait), “because [she] was expressing the same thing in literature.” This instance of intertranslatability is best observed in her own “Portraits,” notably in “Guillaume Apollinaire.”

Considered by many a fine example of Stein’s most disconcertingly opaque writing, the five lines of “Guillaume Apollinaire” (the title must be counted in) defy interpretation as they invite daring play of word sounds in more than one language:

Guillaume Apollinaire

Give known or pin ware.

Fancy teeth, gas strips.

Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pour state at.

Leave eye lesson I. Leave I. Lessons. I. Leave I lessons, I.

Starting with the homophony of “eye”/“I” in the last and perhaps least shocking line, and having in mind Apollinaire’s visual, calligrammatic poetry, the Cubist circularity of the poem, with no beginning or end, strikes the eye: I, Guillaume Apollinaire, give eye lessons. Then, the juxtaposition of “lessons” and “leave,” in a portrait of a French-writing poet drawn in words by an English-writing poet, conjures up the French homophone of “lessons” [leçons], “laissons” [we leave/let’s leave], thus establishing the complicity between the portraitist and her subject, both of them foreigners in Paris. Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) was not a Frenchman but a Pole (Guglielmo Alberto Wladimiro Apollinare de Kostrowitzky) whose first language was Italian. His mother always called him Wilhelm, like the German Kaiser. To consider the way people hear an unknown language and awkwardly repeat orally or in writing, often transliterating, a foreign, strange-sounding name, not simply the Frenchified “Guillaume Apollinaire” but the Latinate German-Slavic “Guglielmo Alberto Wladimiro Apollinare de Kostrowitzky,” may be one key to enjoying Stein’s poetic strategy, not only in this most provocative of her “Portraits” (“Guillaume Apollinaire” and all its possible sounds, “native” and “foreign,”

grotesquely translated into “Give known or pin ware”), but also in her writing as a whole. Stein’s poetic practice exemplifies to perfection Stevens’s insight that only when we realize that we are all foreigners, can we be natives in this world.

The pieces of writing in which Stein comes closest to conveying the immediacy and authenticity of “being existing” are her love poems. In her lecture on “Poetry and Grammar,” quite in tune with modernist perplexities, Stein finds it difficult to distinguish prose from poetry. Prose, she says, is the balance of sentences and paragraphs composed mainly of verbs, articles, and pronouns. Not nouns or adverbs. Poetry is just the opposite. Poets, she says, have always been “drunk with nouns.” The concept is traditional enough (“think of Homer, think of Chaucer, think of the Bible”). Poetry is naming: In the beginning was the Word. Or, according to my main thesis in this paper, In the beginning was silence and therefore the word was made possible. For Stein, too, poetry is not so much a fixed form, but the awesome “discovery” of love by giving it a name, or names: *Tender Buttons* (1914). As she was writing *The Making of Americans* and balancing the life of people and generations of people, “something happened,” she says. She discovered, her wording in “Poetry and Grammar” leads us to conclude, the wonder of being in love. She discovered that things were finally made visible to her as sensuous things, and all of a sudden there was no balance in her writing, only passion. The poetic passion of naming. Not the passion of inventing new nouns for names that have been names for a very long time (that’s the job of slang), but the passion of naming anew the proper names of things. All of a sudden, she was, like a first-rate translator, conjuring up, not a vocabulary of thinking (as in *How to Write*), but a vocabulary of *thinging*. The sensuous thinging of “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms” in *Tender Buttons*.

. . . I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names. And how was I to do so. They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made

poetry, I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it made the Tender Buttons, and the Tender Buttons was very good poetry . . .

While slang finds new nouns to freshen up the old names of things, poetry names the proper-noun-names of things in such a way as to make them both new (things and names). Nowhere is Stein more eloquent regarding the belatedness of modern poetry and the possibility of its reinvention than in her remarks to the student who once asked her about her celebrated repetition of the rose. In order to reinvent the “excitingness of pure being” in the “wornout literary words,” Stein argues after Pater, the poet has “to put some strangeness, something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun.” In that particular line of one particular poem, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” the rose, Stein rounds off triumphantly, “is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.” Likewise, each paragraph-poem in *Tender Buttons* (literally “emotional” because, being “buttons,” they fasten and unfasten passion, like women’s nipples) is a naming indistinguishable from a sensuous thinging, a domestic still life, somewhat like one of Stein’s portraits:

A petticoat.

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

Potatoes.

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

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

In the paragraphs isolated above from each of the three parts of *Tender Buttons*, each one with its own dream-like ambience, several threads of meaning can be woven into the domesticity already announced by the three title-words (“Objects”

“Food” “Rooms”). Female underwear and the abandonment of bedroom intimacy. Cooking and the kitchen. Emotions and sentiment, this last one to be easily connected metaphorically with the previous two. For example: the juxtaposition of sweet and bitter loving with measuring spoon suggests sexuality wishing to escape regulation. It would not be difficult to engage in similar acts of intertranslatability and trace other lines of the same kind of signification. Clothing and sewing, eating and drinking, pecking and petting. *Tender Buttons* places English lyric poetry in the tranquil geography of trivial — yet joyful, playful, pleasurable, and caring — quotidian living in the feminine. The poetic closure of *Tender Buttons* does away with bucolic sentiment only to translate it into something strangely new inside the woman’s sitting room:

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

Stein, writing not only like a woman but *as* a woman and translating lesbian passion into writing, thus reinvents erotic poetry. In a far more exuberant and explicit manner than *Tender Buttons*, “Lifting Belly” (1915-1917), which was not published in Stein’s lifetime, speaks a new language of sexual love and love making never heard before: “What did I say,” she boasts, “that I was a great poet like the English only sweeter.” “Sweeter,” she means, than “sweet Will,” who in the sonnets puns on sexual desire and gourmandise in a manner that is comparable to Stein’s in her erotic poetry: “Lifting belly this./So sweet./To me./Say anything a pudding made of Caesars./Lobster. Baby is so good to baby.” (A whole paragraph in the first few pages of “Patriarchal Poetry” reads like a parodic menu for the week). “Lifting belly is a language,” a coded language, to be sure, for translating passion, a language that savors and delights in the elliptical, syncopated dialogues of two women’s intimate living together and its many private double meanings, or intertranslatability. It is a language full of the tastes, sounds, smells, and rhythms of female domesticity, yet fully aware of the world outside as well (including the Great War). While Stein’s

language here is crisscrossed by enigmatic references, such as “a cow” and “two caesars,” it is charmingly decodable in repeated readings of its self-interruptive and cross-referential repetitiousness. “Cow” refers to the woman’s sexual organs (punning on the vulgar French term), “caesars” to her breasts, and what they can accomplish together: orgasm (“as a wife has a cow, a love story,” in “A Book Concluding with As a Wife Has a Cow. A Love Story” [1926]).

It would be tempting to approach the poem biographically (some people called Stein “Caesar” because she looked like a Roman emperor) and discover a “fatty” Gertrude, a “thin” Alice, and their “Ford” (or “Aunt Pauline”), or the hymeneal ménage of husband-Gertrude and wife-Alice as “jew lady” (“my little Hebrew” was one of Stein’s endearing names for Alice). But, as always, biographism adds little to the erotic effect of the poem, beyond the envious titillation of peeping into the joyfully gratified life of two famous lesbian lovers. “Lifting belly” is the poem’s major character and single plot: “Lifting belly means me,” “Lifting belly is . . . the only spectacle.” It is each of the lovers as they engage in their love making and the reciprocal climax of pleasure itself: “Lifting belly is so kind.” Traditionally enough (think of “The Song of Songs,” or Shakespeare’s sonnets), for Stein, too, sex and love making are the perfect way of translating the wonderous complexity of life. The ecstasy of “being existing.”

Some of Stein’s male colleagues resented her power as a *woman* writer, and that is a clear sign of that power. T. S. Eliot is reported to have once said that Stein’s writing “is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one’s mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested.” Evidently, Eliot is not interested in Stein’s version of intertranslatability. He speaks of a “we,” associated with the hegemonic culture, and of an implicit “other,” explicitly identified by race and perhaps obliquely by gender as well (“the saxophone” and “the barbarians”). For Eliot, Pound, Windham Lewis and others, the professionalization of poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century, countering the popular poetesses’ “embroidery” and the threatening emergence of other traditions, called for the full concentration and total dominion of the (white) masculine genius. “Masculine genius” would even sound somewhat pleonastic.

Stein herself, who around 1909 had read Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* approvingly, had to force herself to transcend being a woman, as well as a Jew, in order to translate herself into a genius and a true literary professional. Hadn't she once told Dr. (William Carlos) Williams that writing was not really *his* métier? Stein's income had, after all, allowed her to write like a man (though not as a man) and thus escape the condition of a Veblenian bourgeois wife in a consumer culture. However, even as her writing denounces the dominant culture and severely interrogates the literary tradition, what Stein claims above all is a prominent place amongst the tradition's "geniuses." The hilariously inscrutable "Patriarchal Poetry" (written in 1927 and never published in Stein's lifetime) can be read as the poet's parodic dissection of the literary construction of the literary tradition in order to earn a place in it.

Indeed, Stein succeeded, and the admiration for her work by younger poets is highest proof of her achievement. Foremost among these are the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, would-be masters of what I have been calling here intertranslatability. But perhaps the best tribute to Stein by a fellow poet came from her contemporary Mina Loy, who in her "Gertrude Stein" described promiscuous Stein as the uncanny alchemist of language, finest master of intertranslatability:

Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
to extract
a radium of the word

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