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"We Like a Fire and We Don't Mind if it Smokes": Gertrude Stein's Transgressive World of Words in Lifting Belly

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In his introduction to Gertrude Stein's 1922 collection entitled *Geography and Plays*, Sherwood Anderson describes Stein as, "the welcome architect of a neglected city – a city of English and American words. For me," he writes, "the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words" (8)

Stein's sixty-two-page poem entitled *Lifting Belly*, composed between 1915 and 1917, aptly accommodates Anderson's analogy which links writing to architecture and building, for the work poeticizes a notional dwelling – notional although responding to aspects of her tangible dwelling and relationship -- built entirely by words and inhabited by Stein and her longtime partner, Alice B. Toklas.[1] While playing with dominant conventions of linguistic signification, she presents a unique space/place in which the title phrase, "lifting belly," repeated consistently throughout, represents both that which escapes traditional verbal definition and yet calls forth, in its various contexts, a joyous web of homosexual eroticism, creation, domesticity, celebration, and social and intellectual defiance (2,4,5, etc.).[2]

There is no pure and simple definition of "lifting belly"; over the course of just three pages, chosen at random, "lifting belly is" any and all of the following adjectives or nouns (which are often intensified by the modifiers "so" or "such"): "good," "anxious," "an occasion," "courteous," "hilarious," "gay," "favorable," "such an incident," "such an incident in one's life," "so kind," "so scarce," "so necessary," "such exercise," "so kind to me," "so kind to many," "right," "so

strong and willing," "so strong and yet waiting," and "so soothing" (8-10). The list continues to mushroom into numerous other referents and descriptions throughout the remainder of the poem, with "lifting" occasionally serving as a participle modifying "belly"; at times it takes the form of a gerund formation and at others a compound noun; and elsewhere still it functions as adjective and its modified object; and it even takes on the characteristics of a living, anthropomorphised identity. In a rare moment of self-mocking awareness of her own vaingloriousness, Stein toys with establishing a sense of "lifting belly's" insulation and importance:

> Lifting belly what is earnest. Expecting an arena to be monumental.
> Lifting belly is recognized to be the only spectacle present. Do you mean that.
> Lifting belly is a language. It says island. Island a strata. Lifting belly is a repetition. (17)

This arena is expected to be "monumental," both as a vital sanctum for its inhabitants and as a constituent of Stein's literary venture as a whole. It is safe to assume, however, given Stein's own recognition of the obscurity of her experimental poetry, that regardless of her confidence in her own ability to write monumentally innovative works, the latter expectation is uttered with more than a hint of irony.

The phrase, "the only spectacle present," reinforces the separation of: (a) her poetry from that of her modernist peers, and (b) her homosexual relationship from a heterosexually-centred society. The connotation of "spectacle" which suggests dramatic public display highlights that aspect of her linguistic projects, as well as the lifestyle it enacts and represents, that are not only unique but also perhaps likely to incite public curiosity or contempt. But spectacle also enables us to see clearly, and lifting belly, seen as "a language" and a defining characteristic of that language, "a repetition," does (if we travel beyond its initial obscurity) reach for ever-increasingly genuine and penetrating illustrations of human emotion,

identity, and experience. The "island" of her works and her relationship exist dynamically and fluidly, just like the words she chooses to construct the poem; thereby lifting belly is "a strata," or a gradation marking just one stage of development in the continuous process of change and creation.

In *Lifting Belly*, Stein presents a fluid, consummate experience labeled "lifting belly" that merges love, intimacy, domestic niceties and rituals, but attempts to expand all of these things, which when referenced by their conventional names (such as those I've used here) suffer by reductive semiotic over-simplification. Stein's continuous repetition of the expression "lifting belly," which functions as the driving force behind and thread of cohesiveness throughout the poem, replaces, and thereby refuses the appointment of, traditional terminology for human experiences and emotions, which she knows never wholly or sufficiently capture the subject at hand. Instead, she seeks to create a poetic vocabulary to suggest that life, and the words a writer chooses with which to poetically represent it can, and perhaps very well should, be individual, subjective, unique to, and invented by and for its subjects.

We can glean a further sense of what is suggested and connoted by "lifting belly" by tracing Stein's own process of "coming to" poetry in the years immediately preceding *Lifting Belly*'s composition, when she embarks upon a venture to abandon hackneyed and therefore enervated words, idioms, and word relationships and replace them with a forcefully regenerated lexicon and grammar. In her lecture entitled "Poetry and Grammar" (1934), which functions in a similarly performative style as the poetic language described therein, Stein denounces (albeit in a limited sense) our most basic unit of language, the noun, for its immutability:

> [T]hings once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them and so why write in nouns…As I say a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known. Everybody knows that by the way they do

> when they are in love and a writer should always have the intensity of emotion about whatever is the object about which he writes. (125-6)

In the process of composition, fixity makes for lifeless poetry whereas flux is the essence of liveliness. She regards words as dynamic, animate entities and their interest to her is directly correspondent to the extent to which they might operate as changeable, open-ended, even playfully misused grammatical units. For example, she declares that articles "are interesting because they do what a noun might do if a noun was not so unfortunately so completely unfortunately the name of something," continuing that a writer can "always have the pleasure that using something that is varied and alive can give…Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive" (127-8). Her declaration is enhanced with the repetition of "unfortunately," amplified further by the repeated attached adverb "so," and intensified still as it is conjoined with another adverb, "completely."

Lifting Belly, along with other texts, such as *Tender Buttons* and "Painted Lace" (1914), is irreducibly plural, with no central, stable meaning. In this sense, Stein's theories of language (as well as her textual enactment of them) precede the post-structuralist theories of Roland Barthes, who focuses his exploration of the erotic play of language on its ceaseless evasion of our grasp as we read a text. Terry Eagleton explains, "The 'healthy' sign, for Barthes, draws attention to its own arbitrariness – which does not try to palm itself off as 'natural' but which, in the very moment of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well" (133). Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), for example, calls our attention to how the supposedly 'natural' sign, in this regard, becomes an authoritarian and ideological tool by limiting pluralistic viewpoints and rejecting alternative possibility.

Although her theoretical explanations of language reject fixity at the level of aesthetics, and not as a blatantly subversive political act, Stein dismantles such

potentially ideological authority regardless. She continues by explaining that proper names are only interesting in that they are ascribed to a person upon birth, so there is an element of choice and change possible, unlike a noun, which has been called the same thing for so many lives, for so long. The anthropomorphism extends to punctuation, with "periods" favourably "[coming] to have a life of their own," stopping her writing at will, refusing to "serve you in any servile way as commas and colons and semi-colons do" (130). She articulates her disregard for commas in a way that conjoins the process of writing itself with living. Commas, a force of restraint that are merely "dependent on use and convenience," bore Stein: "A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it…" (131). Her previous and temporary reliance upon them – such as throughout her earlier *Three Lives* (1905-6) -- became, in her words, "positively degrading" (132). The following passage, appropriately short of four commas given her growing disdain for them, illustrates how, to Stein, the vital words determine their own need for autonomy:

> The longer and more complex the sentence, "the greater the number of the same kinds of words I had following one after another, the more the very many more I had of them the more I felt the passionate need of their taking care of themselves by themselves and not helping them, and thereby enfeebling them by putting in a comma. (132-3)

In her search for poetic forms that most faithfully represent human consciousness and emotion, narrative is refused entirely and the chronology of events is so irrelevant as to be collapsed into numerous parallel streams of unordered impression. "Poetry," writes Stein, "is I say essentially a vocabulary just as prose is essentially not…Poetry is concerned with using and abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun…Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (138). She remembers, "looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing

would come to be written" (142). In the sense that "lifting belly" represents (but is not limited to) a collage of emotions, a place, and a relationship, we could ascertain that over the course of the poem, *Lifting Belly* is an "actual thing," that has "come to be written," much like Shakespeare's forest of Arden, which was created in a way that Stein noted as being particularly compelling: "without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name its names" (141).

Julia Kristeva's "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1974) defines what could be considered Stein's free play of the signifier in psychoanalytic terms, overlooking Stein herself and citing James Joyce and Stephen Mallarmé as primary exemplars. Posited in opposition to Lacan's "symbolic" order, which is patriarchal and concerned with the phallus as the fixed and authoritative, or transcendental, signifier, is the "semiotic," which can be described as a flow of forces or drives ("pulsions") inside of language (91-2). This pre-Oedipal "pattern or play," which exists before the child has entered into the symbolic (signifying) realm of language, is essentially chopped up and "articulated into stable terms" (Eagleton 188). Once repressed upon the child's entering into the realm of the symbolic, the semiotic can appear within language, (primarily the writings of avant-garde poets, according to Kristeva) in "tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence, and absence" (Eagleton 188). Drawing from Mallarmé's attention to the semiotic rhythm in langauage, Kristeva writes, "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation," and later, "instinctual…preceding meaning and signification, mobile, amorphous, but already regulated" (97, 102).

Along these lines which privilege disruption over comprehension of fixed meaning, readers of Stein get the feeling that familiar words suddenly become strangers; it seems then that they are on the right track towards understanding (or perhaps -- better yet -- *feeling*) Stein. She uproots words from their traditional, prescribed meanings and aims to dislodge our assumptions about relationships

between the signifier and its signified, and thereby uproots her readers from their familiarity with the language as they have come to know and use it. If the process of digesting Stein's innovative use of language feels as if it requires an initial leap of faith, we need not, however, feel alienated from the experiences within *Lifting Belly*, nor by its grammatical constructs and diction. Rather, we can acquire a sense that intimacy beyond straightforward articulation is being expressed. Between word and sense lie similar inexpressible feelings, correlative with those between descriptions of love, for example, and love itself. In this exultant realm, Stein's linguistic rules (and correspondingly Stein's and Toklas's rules of behaviour and communication) are the only ones that apply, and subsequently we find commonplace linguistic and social conventions challenged and/or dissolved, thereby creating a space for the freedom of the individual at her most essential and intimate.

Lifting Belly / "lifting belly" as Discrete Domains: Reconfiguring Centrality and Reacting to Adversity

There are two primary sources that qualify the poem's focus, lifting belly, as a realm designed and designated for triumphant rejoicing. The tone of the poem is determined by its rhythmic, clipped lines that oscillate between an active dance of optimistic provocation and self-assuredness and comfort and calm. Secondly, the celebratory nature of "lifting belly" prevails even as Stein refuses to deny the less favorable forces present in the tangible world that can and have worked against her own (and Alice's) contentedness. Instead she confronts them, lyrically toys with them, reigns supreme over them, and even embarrasses them. Rather than allow her reactions to adversity to prove devitalizing, Stein manages to form a self-enclosed reality, permeated with and often entitled "lifting belly," in which the details of day-to-day existence are extolled because this is the most basic forum in which the eroticism and magic between these two people (or any couple for that matter) exists.

"Lifting Belly" therefore serves as a safe haven, and its qualities that render it as such are largely created in reaction and antidotal to the outside world apart from

which it is set. These qualities are amplified by repetition, tones of affection and jubilation, and occasional cunning dismissal of what it has, in its appropriated central position, deemed *other*. *Lifting Belly*, like so much of Stein's writing (such as *Brewsie and Willie* [1946] and *Everybody's Autobiography* [1937]), provides us with an historical perspective on the day-to-day existence of citizens managing their lives and emotions at a time of war. But beyond these experiences, commonly marked by isolation, malaise, ennui, and tension, the poem expresses a parallel construction, that is the marriage of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, which responds to the very same influences of the world at war but is further isolated by homosexuality and the couple's desire to create this autonomous world. The marriage is simultaneously separated from and exalted in relation to its heterosexual counterpart with:

> Darling wifie is so good.
> Little husband would.
> Be as good.
> If he could.
> This was said.
> Now we know how to differ.
> From that. (55)

The sharp contrasts between the outside world and that of lifting belly are firmly established in Part One of the poem, which begins, "I have been heavy and had much selecting. I saw a star which was low. It was so low it twinkled. Breath was in it" (1). These relatively slowly articulated and sombre lines are amongst the longest in *LiftingBelly*, and are markedly devoid of either any mention of lifting belly (which as I have noted will be repeated ad infinitum later) or the call-and-response conversational tone of the bulk of the poem. Written in the past tense, the lines offer information about what forced and/or entitled Stein to create the alternative realm into which she will soon launch. She has been "heavy" – heavy with the burdens of a world at war in 1917; heavy with the stigmas of being a homosexual woman in a society dominated by the heterosexual/heterosexist,

masculine mindset; heavy with the need to write *Lifting Belly*, to feel lifting belly; and to lift belly, which connotes erotic movement, appetite fulfillment, and general propulsion into action. In the introduction to a 1989 edition of the Stein poem, Rebecca Mark writes, "Stein is heavy with the weight lying on her, the dusty old books telling her that female sexuality is either precious and frail or evil and dangerous. She is also heavy with the weight of what is lying in her, the weight of this poem in her belly. She is heavy and full with love, with the desire to express her love. She is excited and she is pregnant" (xxi-xxii). In a reversal of critical assessment, we can gain further information about Stein's work by interpreting Mark's interpretation. It, like so many explications of Stein's poetry, can't help but begin to emulate the poem itself – it has caught the "smile" of *Lifting Belly* – created by its cadence, repetition, buoyancy, and placid rejection of unambiguous definition -- such as with Mark's usage of "excited" and "heavy" and "pregnant." To his credit, Donald Sutherland, one of Stein's most recognized and respected critics, also tends to fall under her tonal and syntactical spell in much of his writing on her work.

Stein knows that to rid herself of "much selecting," an impeditive and oppressive process within herself and imposed upon her by others, is to embrace the accessibly "low" star of sexual and creative freedom that breathes with life and twinkles with newfound energy. With the statement, "Little pieces are stupid," Stein shuns the world of petty detractors that could attempt to destabilise lifting belly (1); lifting belly is an organic experience that cannot be fragmented by adversity, merely solidified. When Stein suddenly shifts to the first person in the second stanza, the distinction between lifting belly and the aforementioned *other* world is reinforced as she forges ahead with a tone of spirited immediacy:

> I want to tell about fire. Fire is that which we have when we have olive.
> Olive is a wood. We like linen. Linen is ordered. We are going to order linen.
> All belly belly well.
> Bed of coals made out of wood.

> I think this one may be an expression. We can understand heating and burning composition. Heating with wood. (1)

Stein flaunts the ways in which conventional aspects of the 'real' world no longer suffice in the sphere of lifting belly as she becomes a linguistic trickster and inventor. The "fire" of erotic love and female passion is referred to as, "that which we have when we have olive." Whereas "olive" can symbolize the branch of peace, it can also transmute into alive, oh live, a love, I love. After all, this is also a domain where utterance (and the freedom to utter as one pleases) incites change: "Sometimes we can readily decide upon wind we decide that there will be stars and perhaps thunder and perhaps rain and perhaps no moon" (1).

Stein humorously mocks the anticipated response to those qualities of lifting belly which might be misinterpreted by creatively limited – and consequently overly-literal – types, with, "I think this one may be an expression," which suggests dually a figure of speech as well as a creative communication of ideas (1). Further mimicry of the objector's voice continues to undercut its jabs, with: "What did you say lifting belly. I did not understand you correctly. It is not well said" (3). One way of responding to such mocking is to bypass the literal en route to the *essence* of lifting belly by succumbing to the rhythmic dance of the language if nothing else. With the lines, "We can understand heating and burning composition. Heating with wood," Stein uses the wood of her pencil to incinerate (and attempt to replace) the predominately linear, determinate compositions written by her patriarchal, heterosexual predecessors. Here, as throughout the poem, the domestic object (in this case firewood) is appropriated as a vehicle for the subversion of the hegemonic order, literary and otherwise. Mark writes, "with the wood of her pencil, with the fire in her belly, like an ancient alchemist Stein heats, and burns what has been composed, and she burns as she composes" (xxii). Via *Lifting Belly's* visual, aural, and linguistic experimentation Stein aims to dismantle and reconfigure basic qualities of patriarchal tradition in favor of what Marianne DeKoven and other feminist critics have described as a "'multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning,' whose primary modes

are dissonance, surprise, and play" (qtd. in Perloff 51). In doing so she appropriates the very dominant space patriarchal tradition usually reserves for the heterosexual / heterosexist male.

Whereas Marjorie Perloff does recognise the validity of reading Stein's texts (as do a number of feminist critics) as "anti-patriarchal, anti-authoritarian, non-linear and oblique lesbian fiction," she states rather clearly that there is much more to it than specific gender orientation, affiliation, and positioning, pointing out amongst other things that "[Stein's] most important role model—perhaps her only real model—was, after all, the aggressively male Picasso" (57). When considering how Stein's undermining of patriarchal authority in language and culture, in complex combination with her subverting of historical and literary feminine norms, destabilises fixed gender categories, the critical question arises of whether to read Stein as: a "gender-free eye from another planet or future age" (Secor 32); a woman assuming masculine personae and voice; or, crucially, first and foremost a woman writer who advances that very group by challenging the phallocentric order. Perhaps, at risk of over-simplifying, Stein's tendency towards what Kristeva later called "pre-Oedipal" language is fittingly gender*less*. Despite the pre-Oedipal's feminine association with the child's connection to the mother's body at this stage of development, it is in the symbolic stage that discrete categories of gender-identification arise. Kristeva writes, "Dependence on the mother is severed, and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other, the constitution of the Other is indispensable for communicating with an other" (102). This type of gender-based inquiry is beyond the scope of this particular study of Stein, but inasmuch as marginalization is associated with the feminine and centrality with the masculine, it is interesting to examine how her self-appointed isolation, in which marginalisation reclaims dominance, is problematised throughout the poem.

Throughout the poem, lifting belly is designated as a discrete domain by presenting yet another trope of self-imposed dissociation. Stein upholds a perpetual differentiation between the worldview held within lifting belly and the

more insolent characteristics of masculine consciousness, suggested by the recurrence of male pronouns at times of contention. The next section reads:

> … Sometimes we decide that there will be a storm and rain. Sometimes we look at the boats. When we read about a boat we know that it has been sunk. Not by the waves but by the sails. Any one knows that rowing is dangerous. Be alright. Be careful. Be angry. Say what you think. Believe in there being the same kind of a dog. Jerk. Jerk him away. Answer that you do not care to think so.
>
> We quarreled with him. We quarreled with him then. Do not forget that I showed you the road. Do not forget that I showed you the road. We will forget it because he does not oblige himself to thank me. Ask him to thank me.
>
> The next time that he came we offered him something to read…I do not pardon him. I find him objectionable. (1-2)

The statements, "Be angry. Say what you think," show that the voices feel no need to hesitate when expressing their self-possession and fortitude. In relation to her penchant for personifying linguistic and grammatical units, Stein has carefully populated "lifting belly" with words and combinations that best represent this realm over which she most comfortably asserts dominion. Sarah Jackson-Meroni locates a marked deliberateness (author-ity) in Stein's unapologetic mollification of adversarial conflict:

> Stein gives her life a smoothness as if all that happened to her was meant in some way to be; no struggles, no hesitations, no unhappiness, except that which she enters into the text. In other words, she had total control over her life in the same way an author controls the lives of her characters or a pioneer controls her own destiny. (31)

Since an aspect of that dominion is the freedom to challenge adversity (and win) in whatever fashion she so chooses, a relationship is established between Stein's

consideration of writing-as-life, on the one hand, and the world entitled "lifting belly," on the other – a world which she, by the very act of writing it, seeks to control. Whereas a variety of Stein's texts present the emotions of frustration, sorrow, and analytical curiosity in response to war, these emotions are pressed to further intensity in*Lifting Belly*. Because of the distance maintained between the poem's private realm and public life, the voices assume tones of exasperation and fury due to their need to preserve lifting belly's serenity and refuge.

The "him" with whom they in lifting belly quarrel could be interpreted as Leo Stein, the most immediate agent of masculine combativeness in Gertrude and Alice's private life, from whom the women had dissociated themselves in 1913. Once Gertrude's artistic, domestic, and emotional independence flowered, what were once her brother's aesthetic lectures generously bestowed upon his less erudite younger sister became repressive, patronizing, obdurately opinionated didacticism. The next lines, "Do not forget that I showed you the road. Do not forget that I showed you the road," if interpreted as Leo's voice, constitute his demand for recognition upon exiting the Parisian home that he once shared with his sister and later with her "spouse" Alice as well (1). And then, in its repetition, the irritation is reinforced.

The statement however simultaneously bifurcates into the decidedly *un*-Leo: "Do not forget that I showed you the road" is also the voice of Gertrude, describing a different road, asking for a different recognition, coming from a different place (1). She has shown Alice the road to communion and is drawing a map for the individual reader and the larger community of readers, of how to "write about [their] sexuality and survive" (Mark xxiv). And for reasons more concerned with literary innovation and the social maturation of the twentieth century (especially with regard to society's attitudes towards same-sex partnering) than egocentrism, she does not want that forgotten. In *The Geographical History of America* (1935), she asserts her own literary salience by stating of herself, "It is natural that again a woman should be the one to do the literary thinking of this epoch" (228). And as Kate Fullbrook points out in "Gertrude Stein and Universal Sympathy" (1990),

"There is, of course, no law against anyone making grandiose claims for themselves, and Gertrude Stein was given to proclaiming herself a genius with a playfulness that nevertheless she seriously meant" (58). The aforementioned quarrel, this intrusion, is anathema to lifting belly, and yet it does exist there, helping to clarify what lifting belly is or might be by virtue of its contrast to the world from which it is markedly detached. Stein expresses disdain for masculine sexual tendencies as well in this section. "He" can be ungrateful, since "He does not oblige himself to thank me." "He" can be ignorant while in single-minded pursuit of his own climax, with the double-entendre, "The next time he came we offered him something to read." Essentially, Stein simply states, "I find him objectionable." Whether "he" is man in general or simply those outside of the realm of consciousness referred to as lifting belly, his ability (or desire) to partake in symbiotic, reciprocal, and wholly united relationships comes up wanting.

Lifting belly's reciprocity, conversely, is simultaneously suggested and enacted in Part One as the poem is propelled into a volleying dialogue (that presents particular challenges for the reader, as it is carried throughout the remainder of the poem) that conjoins two voices in a verbal dance, pulsating with sensually repetitive motion and encouraging lively and open communication. Domestic roles are played -- but we do not know to whom they are assigned -- and a hierarchical relationship is sporadically implied, yet without fixed positions. The dominant and subordinate roles (which could also be read as active / passive) are frequently hybridized and denoted "lifting belly," such as: "Lifting Belly in a mess. / Lifting belly in order," and "Lifting belly must please me" (34-35). Admissions of love and devotion are offered according to this alternating transference of authority:

> I say that I need protection.
> You shall have it.
> After that what do you wish.
> I want you to mean a great deal to me.
> Exactly.

> And then.
> And then blandishment. (39)

If we read the lines as a dialogue with alternating speakers, the very same voice that vulnerably admits her need for protection immediately becomes inquisitive about her lover's needs (seemingly certain that she will receive the protection she needs), marked by a shift to an assertive tone ("Exactly") and blunt, pithy sentences ("And then blandishment"). The second speaker's parallel transformations indicate that

Lifting belly's authority habitually shifts, raising larger questions as to the nature of authority and to what extent it *can*, in fact, shift as well as undermining the notion of the possibility of one integrated, central voice of authority within a given text. In addition, traditional nuptial roles are subverted and then equalized as the bearer of the title "wife" (or occasionally "my wife" or "wifie") and the voice that requests that the other "change [her] name" neither belong distinctly to one partner or the other, but to either and both (27, 44, 55, 21). *Lifting Belly* offers a potential literary escape from the limitations of determined, fixed domestic and romantic roles and thereby offers an alternative to the authoritative fixity of the traditional masculine/feminine binary opposition; the passion and play of the poem absorbs and transforms mundane details -- such as housework and "ordering linen" and baking cakes and discussing apricots -- into sacred ritual. Interspersed with a seemingly banal discussion about paying for paper and whether or not to travel to the country is the affectionately gushed: "Lifting belly is so strong. I love cherish idolize adore and worship you. You are so sweet so tender and so perfect" (19). In the world of lifting belly, emotions and activity function fluidly and symbiotically, so adoration and the workaday, inextricably linked, need not constitute separate conversations.

Regardless of the volleying voices' confidence and contentment, their need to reiterate acknowledgement of difference against objection or challenge must necessarily surface:

> Address it say to it that we will never repent.
> And I am happy.
> With what.
> With what I said. (4)

Marjorie Perloff describes a section of "Marry Nettie" (from *Painted Lace* [1917]), a Stein poem which pokes fun at the Futurist poet on whose name it puns, F.T. Marinetti. The line which reads, "'We took a fan out of a man's hand'," is a "droll gesture [that] acts as a gentle slap on Marinetti's wrist, a comic dismantling of the pretentiousness Stein discerns in Futurist poetics" (55).[3] Whereas Perloff refers to a specific literary group criticised by Stein, the elements of drollness and comic dismantling fittingly apply to *Lifting Belly*'s unspecified group of objectionable types. The patronising "gentle slap" is emphasized with the indeterminacy of the pronouns; "Say to it" becomes doubly dismissive as the voices agree to dignify "it" with a response that is unequivocally devoid of regret just as they undercut the objector by denying "it" a human (gendered) pronoun designation.

Pronouns here, and abundantly within *Lifting Belly*, serve as opportunities for Stein to address psychological and social concerns via the ascription of power (or lack thereof) associated with naming. The voices of "lifting belly" are never named but referred to as "I," "we," "me," and "you," with the exception of terms of endearment, which are used inasmuch as they can emphasise the amourous tone and/or pun upon themselves, such as "Caesar" which becomes "seize her" (24). On page 33 an accelerated wordplay pluralises this nickname of Alice's for Gertrude to the extent that it subsumes Alice as well: "I say lifting belly and then I say lifting belly and Caesars. I say lifting belly gently and Caesars gently. I say lifting belly again and Caesars again. I say lifting belly and I say Caesars and I say lifting belly Caesars and cow come out. I say lifting belly and Caesars and cow come out" (33).[4] Stein removes individual names in favour of pronouns ("anyone" and "someone") in her representations of human nature, which in turn highlight her egalitarianism and her belief in the potential for purity within

individual human relationships. Whereas F.T. Marinetti, as discussed by Marjorie Perloff, "railed against" the pronoun "I" as "a vestige of the 'old' psychology," Stein rails against proper nouns as similarly antiquated vestiges (48). She transmogrifies the "I" of the "old psychology" into a collective central self, which paradoxically emphasizes her *conditional* egalitarianism. Although egalitarianism might be possible and necessary in her own discrete reality, she takes advantage of the fused identity's (the two-as-one's) collective ability to express or defend itself against opposing forces. "We" and "us," essentially synonymous with the shifting and therefore unifying designations "you," "I" and "me," are pronouns strengthened by their indeterminacy, whereas "he," "it," "they," and (perhaps even more so) "anybody," "somebody," and "nobody" become emasculated as lifting belly refuses to recognize individuality. Catharine R. Stimpson locates this merging in a variety of Stein's grammatical tendencies. "Her wiping out of quotation marks in passages of dialogue," she writes, "makes the flow of speech between people more important than their separate statements. Her syntactical ambiguities fuse persons and roles. For example…lifting, as a gerund, signifies both the act of lifting and the actor who is lifting the belly, so deliciously. The word merges lover and beloved" (133-4).

To only consider this as a deliberate tactic aimed at phallocentric patriarchy, however, limits Stein's verbal experiments to those of a feminist writer with a specific agenda, when she, in fact, wrote to transcend this or any other category working in reaction to oppression. In her assessment of Stein's ethical positioning, Kate Fullbrook posits that as a writer, Stein was "a woman who pointedly refused to fit into 'feminine' categories, and who chose to adopt a persona of wisdom and authority which enacts, rather than argues for, the justice of egalitarian claims to knowledge and being" (59). In accord with this ethical impetus, the poem's ambiguous line, "A great many things are weaknesses" implies that weakness arises from splintering, fragmentation, a lack of a coherent center or wholeness (4). Five sentences later the chiasmatic sentence, along with the added pronoun "There," now reads, "There are a great many weaknesses,"

highlighting the double meaning of the original sentence as well (4). Now we read that many qualities are weak qualities, many of which have been addressed already in the poem, such as ignorance, creative and intellectual rigidity, and combativeness. The chiasmus denies the clarifying function of repetition, for if this (or any) statement were to lend itself to unequivocal interpretation, Stein would have written the line this way the first time. Hence, the difference is enhanced via slightly altered similarity.

With this type of fluid indeterminacy (as enacted in her egalitarian persona), is Stein avoiding or deliberately subverting systems of problematically power-related binary opposition, in this case that between masculine and feminine, which she seems to attempt to reconcile? As mentioned earlier, she releases the gender binary's hold on determining behaviour (such as within her literary theories and texts, as well as concerning roles within her relationship with Toklas), and she calls into question the self/other, public/private, and sense/nonsense binaries, as explored later. In one sense, if undermining and conflating the masculine/feminine binary allows for the reinscription of a conceptually bi- or trans- gendered, egalitarian persona, Stein, as subject and poet has more freedom (and authority) to define her position at any given time. The question, however, of Stein's deliberate (and deliberately articulated) sense of contentment, arises once again as fractures, or vulnerabilities, in Stein's presentation of herself and her world are revealed, and we notice that she is not immune to "many weaknesses" (4). Stein writes, "Lifting belly is such exercise," and soon thereafter, "I will not say what I think about lifting belly. Oh yes you will" (10); the poem continues later with:

> Well then please have it understood that I can't be responsible for doubts.
> Nobody doubts.
> Nobody doubts.
> I have no use for lifting belly.
> Do you say that to me.
> No I don't. (11)

"Nobody" here can again be read as a dismissive pronoun, especially in the repetition of the phrase "Nobody doubts," which, by being stated twice, encourages a re-placing of the stress. The first reading naturally connotes the meaning "There are no doubters," but to reread it immediately prompts another reading: Anyone who does doubt is a nobody.

Whereas the merged voices are so often mutually reinforcing and jubilant in combination, they also assume mutual humility. Doubts (including self-doubt) intrude, no matter how much "protection" abounds:

> Protection.
> Protection.
> Protection.
> Speculation.
> Protection.
> Protection. (61)

The intruding "speculation" here might be that of the status quo speculating about lifting belly's unorthodox eroticism, or it might be the voices of lifting belly themselves, collectively or individually questioning their certainty of receiving protection from or ability to protect one another sufficiently. Living, like writing, is a continuous process of opening up. The notion of absolute certainty, like authority previously, is thereby problematised. Elizabeth Fifer writes, "Questioning and doubt establish a rhetorical situation in which she cannot only ask questions, and answer them, but also raise further questions. By this process she extends the complexities of her inquiries and emphasizes the relativity of all judgments and values" (476). Despite (or perhaps spurred on by) resistance, Stein posits a world that ultimately refuses to apologise for itself, where objection is subsumed and there is always a marked return to condescendingly toying with the voices of antagonism, such as with, "Jerk. Jerk him away" (2). At other times, their refusal to submit to 'his' opinion fuels the fires of lifting belly.

Stein's Language: The Rhetoric of Obscurity and Indeterminacy

Grammar, according to Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), is a set of rules according to which any grouping of words must pay heed in order to make sense; if Stein refuses these arrangements (and we have seen that she does in myriad ways), then Stein makes no sense, and reading her poetry should give rise to responses similar to that of the incensed journalist who reviewed Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in 1914 – and innumerable casual readers since: "The words…are English words, but the sentences are not English sentences according to the grammatical definition. The sentences indicated by punctuation do not make complete sense, partial sense, nor any other sense, but nonsense" (qtd. in Perloff 36).

Stein's writing, with its various subversions of proper English sentence structure, is all too aware of its own tendency to conform to the category which Wittgenstein would consider nonsensical, having "been excluded from the language, withrawn from circulation," but rather their inclusion depends upon readings that are both open-ended and exploratory (qtd.in Perloff 35). She creates a structurally complex style out of a limited vocabulary, adverbs follow verbs ("Lifting belly magnetically"), objects of sentences become their subjects (Miracle you don't know about the miracle"), adjectives become nouns and adverbs ("Lifting belly and kind" and "So kindly"), and verbs occasionally disappear altogether ("Lifting belly again," "Lifting belly after all," and "Lifting belly all around" (29, 22, 31, 23). Kate Fullbrook insists that Stein "tries to create an unprecedentedly active audience. It is the degree of freedom she offers that readers find so disturbing" (65). Meaning is not absent, or even reduced, it is merely reconfigured and approached differently. Stein writes of compositional process, "I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word and at this same time I found very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense" (*Yale* xxii)

In the analysis of a poem where visual and sound patterns aim to dislodge previous 'rules,' and, consequently, subvert previous interpretive pathways, am I, her reader, misguided in attempting to clarify, or 'make sense of,' the obscure (and by this I mean difficult) attributes of the language, and the poem itself? Marjorie Perloff poses a similar question: "Why is it not enough to say, of the passage in question, that it represents Stein's refusal to "mean," her dislocation or disruption of patriarchal language…Why violate the *jouissance* of Stein's 'pre-Oedipal' language?" (56). Can I fuse the interpretation that seeks meaning with that which appreciates the pre-Oedipal into a reading that dismantles the limiting binaries between sense and nonsense, content and form? Since this world of lifting belly is so suggestive of self-enclosure and linguistic privacy (which could also be read as exclusion of the reader), is an interpretation that seeks to unearth all possible connotations of the word "olive" erroneous? Not necessarily, and Stein herself challenges her own obscurity time and again. A 'private' language, such as in *Lifting Belly* and her other love poems, can no longer remain private once published, and the receipt and comprehension of that language is then released to the public. Wittgenstein denies the possibility of the privacy of language by claiming that anything expressible must have public meaning; he asks:

> 256. Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which I myself can only understand? How do I use words to stand for my sensations? – As we ordinarily do? Then are my words for sensations tied up with my natural expressions of sensation? In that case my language is not a 'private' one. Someone else might understand it as well as I. (91)

Stein further disallows the opacity of her own linguistic games and experiments with her considerable assortment of annotative and elucidative texts, such as "Poetry and Grammar," "Composition as Explanation" (1926), and "How to Write" (1932). In fact, she ultimately attached an expository introduction to her longest, most radically experimental, and most difficult text, *The Making of Americans*

(1925) (entitled *The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans* [1935]) that outlined her linguistic strategies, philosophies, and compositional procedures.

Additionally, to aim for nonsense would be too intentional, too contrived, and Stein's purposes are more akin to experiments exploring the hypothesis that unknown forces are released when words are combined. When she recounts memories of her school days in "Poetry and Grammar," she unequivocally asserts that the most interesting lessons were always those that taught the diagramming of sentences: "I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences…and that has been to me ever since the one thing that has been completely exciting and completely completing. I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves" (126). This curiosity challenged her to write sentences that are largely undiagrammable, where individual elements serve multiple functions, and parts of speech are either so scrambled or fragmented as to render them unnecessary or uncategorisable. Stein privileges form over content, and her experiments with configurations and combinations of words aimed to produce a reinvigorated effect from familiar words.

Stein's words and phrases often produce aural effects that surpass the power of their own definitions. They become mantra-esque in their repetition, and the reading mind is thus nudged out of its reliance upon content and into a perceptual effect that is often visceral and sensual. The beat poet Kenneth Rexroth offers an interpretation of Stein that exemplifies how many writers of the 1960s, took an interest in what her poetry had to offer to their quests for achieving transcendent experiences through writing: "Gertrude Stein showed, among other things, that if you focus your attention on 'please pass the butter,' and put it through enough permutations and combinations, it begins to take on a kind of glow, the splendor of what is called an 'aesthetic object'" (*Yale* xv). Stein's poetry, like music producing certain emotional effects in its listener, can raise the act of reading to a level beyond mere comprehension of the equation signifier & signified = sign.

Consider, for example, the following section:

> Bouncing belly.
> Did you say bouncing belly.
> We asked her for a sister.
> Lifting belly is not noisy.
> We go to Barcelona to-morrow.
> Lifting Belly is an acquisition. (16)

In lieu of an explicit progression of signification is the accruing of sounds and, consequently, the accruing of impact via their echoing. The alliterative conjunction "bouncing belly" (enhanced by its repetition in the next line), introduces the sibilant that is picked up in "asked," and imbedded in each subsequent line with, respectively, "sister," "is," "noisy," "Barcelona," "is" (again), and "acquisition." The same consonant sound travels across words in which it is located in different places, and therefore functions slightly differently each time. Stein explores different expressions of alliteration by focusing on repeated consonant sounds *inside* of words, thus creating internal alliteration. The consistency of the repeated sound, in which. focuses our attention on the sounds that surround it, and a rhythm is thus created around the sounds upon which they are hinged. (Stein once remarked, in a related paradoxical inversion of the expected model of that which we focus on versus that which we overlook, that she loved to visit museums so she could view the changing world outside through the fixed lens of museum windows.)

Similarly, patterns of letters-as-visual-entities (much like with concrete poetry but without direct correspondence between the visual pattern and the subject expressed) are repeated to the extent that they eventually remove themselves from our reader's eye and cause us then to focus more intently on what words lie between, around, and beyond them. A section on page 21 reads:

> Question and butter.
> I find the butter very good.

Lifting belly is so kind.
Lifting belly fattily.

The repetition of the pairings "tt" and "ll" serve as visual constants that simultaneously consociate the lines (via similarity) and separate them (via slight alterations). The double consonants serve as fixed visual referents around and because of which the reader can measure change .

Whereas *Lifting Belly* might initially impose upon its reader an impression of nonsensical syntactical and indeterminate semantic arrangements, it actually tests and retests the limits of language and its ability to express both content and initiate a sensory experience in its reader that exists beyond subject, plot, literary allusion, or direct representation of social reality. The idea of "sense" in Stein's poetry is based on an element of surprise, and the words in the combinations she chooses engender an emergent and subjective experience, for the reader as well as poet. She aimed to communicate (paradoxically) with repetition human experience beyond the capacity of language. Not only is this aim paradoxical because Stein uses language to unearth what lies before or beyond it, but also because she uses a word over and over and over again for this purpose. She was alchemically drawn to the ways words fit together and appreciated the beauty and ugliness and power of laying them up against each other and then sitting back to experience the constructions' emergent properties. There can be such rhythmic effect that it is like music, a mood or effect is enacted and stirred up beyond the effects of the words.

In keeping with the impetus of *Lifting Belly*, the introductory Part One concludes with the optimistically defiant affirmation: "Yes we will it will be very easy" (3); and the poem itself quietly and assuredly comes to a close with, "In the midst of writing. / In the midst of writing there is merriment" (62). Despite apprehensions, such as self-doubt and the encroachment of objection from adversaries outside of this realm, Stein both begins and ends the linguistically enactive body of *Lifting Belly* with affirmations implying that she will continue to live, love, and explore

in this dynamic playground – a realm that is *not* based entirely upon the need for its homosexual women to defend their rights to happiness, but rather based on their knack for unapologetically claiming them.

Endnotes

[1] Most critics read *Lifting Belly* as an erotic poem in tribute to Alice B. Toklas, and consequently locate the voices within the poem as those of Gertrude and Alice. Their respective nicknames can be found throughout the poem, along with details of specific aspects of their lives together that have been referred to in various autobiographical writings. The point is, however, essentially irrelevant in comparison to the idea that a communion of merged, and therefore dissolved identities and/or personae, drives the poem.

[2] Although Stein capitalises one or both of the words "lifting belly" at times and writes them in lower case at others, I will generally leave the phrase uncapitalised in my references.

[3] Despite certain similarities between their linguistic philosophies, such as the compulsion to dismantle hackneyed grammatical conventions, such as syntax, Stein asserts in The *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) that Marinetti and the Futurists in general were dull and unworthy of the attention they received around 1912.

[4] Richard Bridgman finds that "The 'cow' is associated with food, with wetness, and with an emergence, which on one occasion is not unlike birth," and that its suggestions of "parts of the body, physical acts, and character traits" can all be seen as part of her insatiable "need to record her passions" (152).

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First Response

This is an able discussion of a complex text. The author skilfully demonstrates Stein's awareness of the limitations of language, as well as her attempts to overcome these constraints by disrupting conventional categories of grammar and syntax, and encouraging multiple and open-ended 'lexical meaning'. The author writes well on Stein's puns, and helpfully (albeit briefly) maps different critical

approaches to Stein’s work. The observations on Stein criticism and its tendency to emulate the author’s style are also perceptive. The closing commentary on the aural and visual effects of Stein’s writing, however, could be developed. The connections between Stein’s linguistic experiments and her transgressive ideas of gender and sexuality form the essence of the argument.