

THE SEEMING AND THE SEEN

ESSAYS IN MODERN VISUAL
AND LITERARY CULTURE

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Ap II 11051

A 4024182



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The Portrait as Word and (A)Head: Gertrude Stein and the Staging of (Her)Self

'What I was after was this immediacy. A single photograph doesn't give it' (Stein, 'How Writing Is Written' 159). It is no coincidence that Gertrude Stein mentions the photograph as a possible art form to express a particular moment (of time)¹ and a 'present immediacy' (155), while at the same time denying this potential and implying that *she as a writer* might be able to create this immediacy. Indeed, all her texts aim to recreate 'reality' in a language that does not represent a particular experience but attempts to create an analogy without relying on the mediating structures of language such as coherence or grammar. For her the process of translation from experience into language becomes a risky undertaking because the words involved in this process have a certain autonomy and develop a dynamics of their own that has nothing to do with the object they are supposed to describe and recreate.

Her literary portraits illustrate in a most radical way her attempt at depicting a person and creating this immediacy at the same time. My discussion of Stein's attempt to create immediacy in her portraits will focus on the ways a dialogue between the writer and the portrayed is established. As Stein's language does not imitate, but is continuously and instantaneously created in the process of composing, Stein's writing subject becomes part of the one portrayed. Recent theories of autobiography are useful in order to theorize Stein's use of staging another person and herself in her portraits, although the portraits to be discussed are definitely not autobiographies in the sense

1 See Peter Halter's reference (80) to John Berger and Jean Mohr's definition of a photograph in *Another Way of Telling* (89). For a more detailed explanation of this moment of time as expressed in a photograph see Halter 103.

that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or *Wars I Have Seen* are, despite the fact that these latter works challenge traditional concepts of autobiography. Many of her portraits depict fellow-artists or other well-known acquaintances and it is therefore not surprising that Stein's composition of these portraits includes her self (sic) as well. Moreover, in recent autobiography studies it has become acknowledged that there is a multiplicity of genres that belong to *autobiography* such as diaries, journals, and travel memoirs, but also photographs, videos, performances, and portraits.

Besides this dialogue between Stein and the subject portrayed, another dialogue is taking place, namely the one between single words that at first sight cannot be linked through conventional forms of language such as structural coherence, grammar, and vocabulary. The composition of the single words within the portrait must be carefully and meticulously analyzed, and related to Stein's process of creating immediacy and the dialogue between herself and the one portrayed. The relationship between the two is similar to the one between the photographer and the sitter as described by Peter Halter; he characterizes the dialogic relationship between the two as a complex partnership in which, as he puts it, 'the sitter will ultimately keep his or her secret' (103). In Stein's portraits, we indeed learn much more about the portraitist than about the one portrayed. Thus, the portraits are not based on any visual details of the subject portrayed, but on the process of composing words and sentences.

I have chosen two of Stein's better-known portraits – those of Picasso and Hemingway – to illustrate her acts of staging and composing. I will not comment upon the different phases of her portrait writing,² nor will I provide a history of literary portraiture,³ as I am mainly interested in Stein's attempt to render 'present immediacy' in writing a portrait of a particular person.⁴ These two portraits have added interest because both Picasso and Hemingway were fellow-artists who had complex relationships with Stein and engaged in an

2 Wendy Steiner divides Stein's portraits into three phases (64–130).

3 For such an overview see Wendy Steiner's *Exact Resemblance* and Haselstein 723–730.

4 This literary program not only refers to her portraits, but to most of her texts.

intensive discussion with her about artists' goals, ideas, and concepts. Moreover, both artists created works representing a masculinity that was always an object of Stein's 'assault on male "genius"' (Will 68).

Besides autobiographical theory, Judith Butler's concept of reiteration and the recent use of *queer* are further theoretical postulates I will employ to discuss the interrelation between self, word, image, and writing process in Stein's literary portraits. I will use *queer* in the sense that it denotes a 'flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception' (Doty 73). The broadness and oscillation of this definition is useful for an exploration of Stein's approach to the subjects' positions as they are always intricately linked to her lesbian identity and her way of *queering* heterosexuality. Thus, Stein's portraits depicting Picasso and Hemingway must be approached with this *queering* notion in mind as the two portrayed artists represent a maleness that provoked (not only) Stein.

'I,' Self, and 'They': Who Is Speaking and Naming?

Stein's frequent use of pronouns without clearly identifiable referents raises the crucial question that Judith Butler asked some years ago in her discussion of the use of the word *queer*: 'Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics?' (227). Butler's warning indicates that naming in the literal sense is a risky but necessary undertaking, and her exploration of the term *queer* demonstrates that its use in various contexts illustrates the temporality of the term. Stein frequently refuses to use terms that name somebody (or something) and yet creates portraits that are meant to describe a person other than herself. I will argue that by avoiding naming, Stein enters into a dialogue with the 'one' to be constructed/portrayed because the speaker or the narrative voice using the personal pronoun also remains unnamed, and indeed can actually take the position of 'he,' 'she,' or 'they.' The

narrative voice is part of the unnamed subjects and continuously maps new territory without assigning positions. Moreover, the performative power involved in a perlocutionary speech act, the kind of speech act which produces effects as its consequences,⁵ does not establish the speaker as an authority through the power of naming. As Butler points out, every statement or term actually gains authority through the act of repetition, which is based on conventional practices. Although Butler mainly deals with hate-speech, the scope of citationality – the term she uses (49) – must be explored. What do we do when we deal with speech acts that do not appear to us as citations and do not echo prior actions, as is often the case in Stein's texts with their shifting pronouns and lack of clear referents? In my reading of the two portraits, Stein can be seen to play with different citations and we as readers have to choose among endless possibilities.

The play and interaction with words and positions that make reiteration possible can also be called queering because all the accustomed attributions and norms do not hold in the process of meaning making in Stein's texts. We know that Stein's 'queer' texts question the discourse of heterosexuality and that her writing is directed against heteronormative oppression. Indeed, it can be called not only 'antilanguage' (Benstock xxiv) but also a queering language. More recent definitions of queering aptly express this kind of staging of performative acts that disrupt cultural norms and categories:

Queering describes the practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one's own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation's heterosexism. (Sandahl 37)

Queering and performativity are intertwined in the sense that performative acts can become subversive when they are disrupted and dissembled. Many of Stein's portraits illustrate a disruptive staging of the portrayed person by the process of displacing this very person.

5 Judith Butler takes up J.L. Austin's speech act theory in her *Excitable Speech*, in particular 15–19. See also J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

The Selves in the Autobiographical

The act of identifying a clearly defined autobiographical self is complicated because the relationship between the author's name and the first-person pronoun 'I' is in process, and is created in the course of a text. There is no consensus in literary studies on how the writing subject is constructed in an autobiographical text, yet the following simplified definition emphasizes the act of identification between the narrative voice and the text it produces; thus, the conscious and intentional use of the 'I' already implies an empowering act: 'Autobiography is defined by two identifications: the author's identification with the narrator, and the narrator's identification with the chief protagonist' (Todorov 25). In spite of this self-naming – seemingly creating an equation between one's name and the 'I' (we are usually given our names by others) – we do not have an 'I' that can be clearly defined by categories such as age, sex, race, profession, marital status, confession, parent versus non-parent, etc. On the contrary, most of the time, though not always, the self that is named 'I' is in flux, being created anew as it is put into language in a narrative. This constant shift between the 'I' in a particular situation and the 'I' being written about creates a tension that cannot be escaped but is frequently ignored in our accustomed modes of attributing identity/identities. Gertrude Stein, one of the most creative and also most philosophical writers of and commentators on 'autobiography,' eloquently maintains:

That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself. (*Everybody's Autobiography* 68)

Stein playfully and almost paradoxically describes the 'you' that 'is not yourself' because of the epistemological gap between the person writing and the person being created in the process of writing. Recent feminist theorizing of autobiography works on the hypothesis that this

'gap' cannot be filled with anything determinate, fixed, or specific. Jeanne Perreault uses the word 'transformation' to express the tentativeness of the self in these texts, to emphasize the fact that the self is provisional in the text and that its writer is 'both product and producer' (194). The self is indeed in the making and is much more than one 'I' that occupies a specific position.

'If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso' and 'He and They, Hemingway'

Stein wrote two portraits of Picasso, one belonging to the so-called first phase, while the second can be considered a kind of 'correction of the earlier panegyric endeavor' (Haselstein 736). I will focus on the second portrait because, written in 1923, it belongs to a new and creative phase in her writing. Moreover, this second portrait is one of the texts Stein comments on in *How Writing Is Written* and *Lectures in America*, one in which she added 'looking' to 'listening' and 'talking,' the three main perceptions necessary for her when composing a portrait:

I began writing the portraits of any one by saying what I knew of that one as I talked and listened that one, and each time that I talked and listened that one I said what I knew they were then. [...] Then slowly once more I got bothered, after all I listened and talked but that was not all I did in knowing at any present time when I was stating anything what anything was. I was also looking, and that could not entirely be left out. ('Portraits' 185, 188)

Looking is, of course, closely related to painting, and thus also to Picasso and his position in twentieth-century art, which plays a crucial role in Stein's second portrait of him. Using the form 'looking' without a preposition (as is the case with her use of talking and listening), Stein does not make entirely clear whether it refers to her as the author/onlooker, whether it is the perception that is triggered when reading/looking at the portrait, or whether it is the act of vision that is

evoked (see also Haselstein 736). Looking at the text, one indeed recognizes a visual structure:

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.

Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon. Would he like it.

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.

Now.

Not now.

And Now.

Now. ('If I Told Him' 464)

The beginning of Stein's portrait conveys an optical 'image,' namely a particular grouping of words that is repeated in different combinations. We as readers see these groupings immediately, the most striking of which is the first line with its chiasmus (see also Haselstein 737). The uncompleted conditional of the title is completed in the first sentence and it is here that we are already confronted with a dialogic situation: the 'I' suggests a possible dialogue between the speaker herself (I assume a female speaker in the absence of any contrary indication) and 'him,' but as it is expressed in the conditional, the dialogue is directed to the speaker in a kind of self-inquiry. The inquiring mode, though, includes the reader as well, because we are confronted with the implied question, which is never explicitly answered in the course of the portrait. The use in the first sentence of the three pronouns without clearly identifiable referents, 'I,' 'he,' and 'it,' emphasizes the queering/querying notion that is evoked through the combination of female ('I'), male ('he') and 'it,' the latter being the most contestable because it can be linked to the speaker, to the 'he' or even to the whole text the 'I' is about to utter, that is, the completed portrait. The temporal adverbs 'Now. / Not now' that follow may therefore be read as referring to the telling of 'it,' thus establishing the kind of immediacy Stein wishes to create.

The replacement of 'he' by the name 'Napoleon' in the third sentence introduces an identification and compares Picasso to the

French leader (Caramello 248–249),⁶ but in the fourth sentence ‘Napoleon’ comes immediately after the conjunction ‘if’ and later on the speaker refers to both ‘him’ and ‘Napoleon’ (‘Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him’), suggesting that they are two different persons. Bringing Napoleon closer to the ‘I’ (‘If Napoleon if I told him’) changes the position of the speaker again; we could even say that ‘I’ might speak through Napoleon although the comparison with ‘he’ (Picasso) and Napoleon still remains a possibility. The parallel vowel rhyme appearing in ‘Napoleon’ and ‘I told’ him’ rhythmically indicates a parallel between Napoleon and the ‘I.’

The ever-shifting positions of the three persons both syntactically but also visually create a portrait that is itself constantly changing like a moving picture. In addition to photography Stein also compared her practice to the cinema: ‘[I]t was like a cinema picture made up of succession and each moment having its own emphasis that is its own difference and so there was the moving and the existence of each moment as it was in me’ (‘Portraits’ 198). The supposed ‘self’ that is present in this portrait speaks from different places and changes accordingly: it is never the same, being sometimes linked to ‘he,’ sometimes to ‘Napoleon.’ The same indeterminacy and shifting is inherent in the temporal order allegedly expressed in language. ‘Now. / Not now’ emphasizes that such temporal ordering is always a construction: as soon as we have uttered ‘now’ it is no longer ‘now,’ but ‘not now.’ Stein explicitly expresses this continuous shifting as she comments on the complicated process of looking:

The trouble with including looking [...] was that in regard to human beings looking inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present with past and future time. (‘Portraits’ 188)

To deal with this paradox, Stein creates constant movement in a portrait that is traditionally supposed to be ‘still’ because it captures

6 Napoleon also appears in Stein’s ‘A Circular Play’ in connection with Henry James who frequently identified with Napoleon.

one moment only, as in a photograph. For her, a moment can only be created if it is presented as something in flux, modified as soon as it is created. This modification takes form as a slight change from what has just been stated, as occurs in the first part of the portrait. This process is closely related to the issue of resemblance that is expected in a (traditional) portrait, and, yet, with Stein, resemblance is constructed in the process of writing and composing words that resemble each other in various ways. Stein's recreation of words is unlimited and so, it seems, is meaning:

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 the same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. ('A Transatlantic Interview 1946' 18)

The continuous process of evoking new, but similar words recalls what Stein described as '[t]he difference is spreading' in *Tender Buttons*, a work with portraits of objects (461). This difference not only creates a different meaning as it is spreading, it is also perceived differently by our eyes or 'I's. The aspect of looking mentioned above is closely interwoven with the moving self in the portrait and the moving self of the onlooker/reader. The act of creating and recognizing resemblance seems to be the way in which a 'present immediacy' can be achieved. In Stein's portrait of Picasso, though, resemblance not only creates a dialogue between Stein and Picasso, it also thematizes resemblance between the two artists, as Ulla Haselstein aptly points out:

Resemblance, the prerequisite of any successful portrait before modernism, is taken up as a formal textual device and turned into a metaphor of a claimed similarity of rank, of an artistic equality between portraitist and Picasso. (738)⁷

In this artistic evaluation, 'he' is repeated with such intensity that the male pronoun becomes ridiculed and a female presence is hinted at by the pun between 'curls' and the absent but implied 'girls':

7 Amy Blau also mentions the issue of ranking in Stein's portrait of Picasso (139–141).

He he he he and he and he and and he and he and he and and as and as he and as
 he and he. He is and as he is , and as he is and he is. He is and as he is and he
 and as he is and he and he and and he and he.

Can curls rob can curls quote, quotable.

As presently. ('If I Told Him' 465)

After the long enumeration of 'he's, 'girls' are presented as quoting and reproducing only. The stating or staging of such gender trouble is obviously linked to the (gender) struggle between Stein and Picasso. We know that Stein suffered from not being widely acknowledged as one of the leading artists of her time as Picasso was. Again and again she criticized male dominance and patriarchal power and in 'Patriarchal Poetry' she even foresees the end of patriarchal poetry ('[p]atriarchal poetry might be finished to-morrow,' 146). Thus, the kind of gender trouble staged in this portrait belongs to Stein's self-portrait as well.

The staging of gender trouble is followed by a more spatial exploration of words that is equally gendered: 'Farther and father' lead on to a 'land' that is repeated many times with different accompanying words:

I land.

Two.

I land.

Three.

The land.

Three.

The land.

Three

The land.

Two

I land.

Two

I land.

One

I land.

Two

I land. ('If I Told Him' 466)

The one 'land' that is first mentioned is connected to the 'I,' but as 'land' can be read as a verb or as a noun, 'I' is also ambiguous because it can also denote the Roman numeral for 1. The equation between 'I' and 1 is of course of utmost relevance with regard to the question of 'who comes first' (464) uttered after the paragraph on resemblance. If the speaker now puts herself in the first position we can consider this as a kind of answer to the question about competition. Although number one is followed by 'two' and 'three,' 'I land' concludes the part on 'land,' and with its repetition six times gains a lot of prominence. The following 'they cannot' establishes a contrast to the 'I' who seems to be the one who 'can.' Furthermore, the homophone of 'I land' and 'island' may suggest an equation between the 'I' and an island, thus making the 'I' special and unique besides implicitly contradicting John Donne's famous phrase 'no *man* is an island' (my emphasis).

The continuous process of composing new words that resemble each other goes hand in hand with queering the words such that the first-person speaker can appropriate them for herself, which means that the 'he' and 'Napoleon' of the first part disappear and are even dismissed in a performative good-bye: 'Play fairly. Play fairly well. A well. As well' (466). The speaker has completed her portrait as announced in the title, but in the completion the subject of the portrait has disappeared and the speaker has taken over. The final lines of Stein's portrait of Picasso, 'Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches' (466) enhance her empowered position even further: she can use words to demonstrate what history will show anyhow (e.g. that Napoleon did not succeed). The 'completed' portrait of Picasso announced in the title is completed in the sense that the first-person speaker becomes the subject of the portrait by queering/querying words in such a way that 'he' is dismissed and re-placed by the 'I'/'eye' that is/was looking (at Picasso), listening (to the words being uttered and continuously modified) and talking (it has the final say) at the same time. Thus, the first-person speaker has become the authority to 'recite' by relying on what belongs to 'history,' to the past as it were: Picasso as a presence has disappeared; what remains is the speaker's composition and (re)citations.

A similar farewell to the subject of the portrait is staged in the portrait of Hemingway, titled 'He and They, Hemingway,' also composed in 1923. We know that the relationship between Stein and Hemingway was not unproblematic for various reasons, and their friendship finally broke apart after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with Stein's unfavorable remarks about Hemingway.⁸ Although in 1923 these tensions had not yet developed, Stein's position vis-à-vis Hemingway the artist is thematized in the same way as in her portrait of Picasso. Stein, the portraitist, explores possible combinations of words in such a way that not only is Hemingway's name taken apart – 'He,' 'And,' and 'They' partly echo the pronunciation, spelling, and rhythm of 'Hemingway' – but Hemingway as the subject of this portrait also gradually disappears.

The beginning is almost unintelligible without knowing that Stein often integrated into her compositions the pictures or words on the cover of the French schoolchildren's notebooks ('cahiers') that she used for her writing. Wendy Steiner (111–113) and Ulla Dydo (449) have carefully studied these notebooks and thanks to them we know that in the opening lines Stein must have used the illustrations on the specific notebook:

Among and then young
 Not ninety-three.
 Not Lucretia Borgia.
 Not in or on a building.
 Not a crime not in the time.
 Not by this time.
 Not in the way. ('He and They, Hemingway')

The cover of this notebook, which belongs to a series on teachers of youth, shows Victor Hugo as the *éducateur* surrounded by illustrations from four of his works, *Quatre-vingt treize*, *Lucrèce Borgia*, *Les châtiments*, and *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Stein seems to compare Hugo's role as *éducateur* to herself, as she indeed taught Hemingway

8 For a detailed account of the tensions between Stein and Hemingway see James Mellow 262–282.

much about style. And yet, the unidentified speaker of this portrait also implicitly refers to Hemingway's famous book *In Our Time*, written at about the same time, although the exact title is not given in the portrait. Thus, Hemingway is indirectly identified through this work, but also through the reference, 'young,' since he indeed belonged to the generation of younger writers whom Stein advised and encouraged. The six-fold repetition of 'not' establishes a contrast implying that Hemingway does not have any of these characteristics. Stein not only creates a dialogue between herself and Hemingway, but also one between tradition (Victor Hugo) and the avant-garde. The lines that follow the short vertical ones may actually be read as a comment on Hemingway's inability to really create avant-garde literature:

On their way and to head away. A head any way. What is a head. A head is what every one not in the north of Australia returns for that. In English we know. And it is to their credit that they have nearly finished and claimed, is their any memorial of the failure of civilization to cope with extreme and extremely well begun, to cope with extreme savagedom.

There and we know.

Hemingway.

How do you do and good-bye. Good-bye and how do you do. Well and how do you do.

The pun with 'head' and 'ahead' and 'Heming(a)way' first makes Hemingway appear as one who actually is ahead, but taking into consideration that he is bid good-bye towards the end implies a critical stance taken by the speaker. Wendy Steiner even associates the 'north of Australia' with a place of cannibalism or headhunters and concludes that Stein would label Hemingway a cannibal (115). Steiner attributes most of the lines with the long sentences to Hemingway, and suggests that they represent his contribution to a conversation in which he criticizes those who do not admit their gratitude to the avant-garde. The short line 'There and we know' brings back Stein's voice and leads to the final farewell with the highly stylized 'How do you do.'

Stein's exploration and punning of 'head' in her portrait of Hemingway can also be related to the genre of the portrait in general:

we expect a portrait to show the head of a person, and Stein actually presents a 'head' in words and their combinations. Her question 'What is a head' can of course be read as 'what is ahead' referring to Stein's writing with all its consequences: it is (so much) 'ahead' because it is constantly moving and cannot be stopped. The creation of new words can generate a new head; it cannot stop with a portrait of one 'I' because the 'I'/eye sees more ahead, listens to more words ahead, and talks about them. This process takes place in the present and creates the immediacy mentioned at the beginning. This immediacy not only creates a dialogue between the portraitist and the portrayed, it is also a performative act that involves a queering that will continue. Through the constant composing of new words to portray Picasso and Hemingway their presence is finally de-composed in such a way that the words gain a self-regulating dynamics. Stein's speech acts do not perform citations in the usual sense of the word, but perform themselves: we readers see (her) words through her 'I'/eye because it creates simultaneously what it sees and listens to.

And we are reading and looking at Stein's words simultaneously.

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