

## A GENDERED STYLE: GERTRUDE STEIN'S GENERIC TRANSGRESSIONS\*

The emergence of gender as a category of analysis in the 1980s shed new light on women's literary studies and opened up a new critical perspective in the field of feminist literary criticism, and in other fields as well, such as history, philosophy, linguistics, science and so forth. The new approach produced a considerable number of studies which analysed the work of men and women focusing on the ways that both reading and writing is marked by gender. In 1989, when Elaine Showalter edited *Speaking of Gender*, then a pioneer work in this area, this concept was "far from reaching a state of consensus" (3) and, as Franziska Gygax readily acknowledges at the outset of her book, this same situation persists regarding the notion of gender as a tool of literary critique. But it is also evident that it hasn't ceased yielding interesting results and Gygax's book is one of them. Among others, one of its virtues consists in having chosen a linguistic experimenter like Stein to analyse the link between her literary practice and her gender. Stein's exercises with language and literary forms had prevented the gender studies of her work, owing to the unfounded conviction that this sort of exploration was adequate only for those texts which displayed a transparent or referential use of the language. Moreover, the difficulty in defining Stein's *oeuvre* within conventional generic classifications adds further to the great contribution that this book supposes in Stein scholarship. The generic uncertainty of her work is complicated by the author's relationship with her own self, that she problematized recurrently, if unconsciously, in her texts, hence making interesting, but troublesome, the connection between her gender and her literary production. Gygax's starting point is precisely to comment on the intricate relationship between the generic configuration of Stein's texts and her gendered identity. The author alerts us to the multifarious generic adscription of Stein's works and, consequently, to the unlikely possibility of finding in them clearcut traits of a particular genre. This constitutes a rather well-known issue in Stein studies and one which has been extensively commented upon. However, Gygax offers a novel view in the way she relates Stein's generic transgressions to "gender specific traits of [her] writing" ("Introduction", 1). She draws a parallelism between Stein's rejection of the hierarchies, classifications and categories typical of genre theories and a similar challenge of those same elements that are present in the gendered configuration of patriarchal society. She is, nevertheless, cautious enough as to remind us that, as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, gender is "indeed an ongoing process and not a fixed category" (Ibid.), emphasizing the lack of a definitive conceptualization of this notion. If, as Judith Butler holds, "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence [and] gender is always a doing" (24-5), then examining the ways in which Stein's performance of her gender influence her writing becomes

particularly relevant for understanding her generic transgressions. And this is so partly because a writer's performance of her gender clearly evinces her acting within language that, incidentally, points to the exploration of her own identity. These are the three axes around which Gyga has carried out her survey: gender-language-identity. She relies on Kristeva's concept of the pre-Oedipal as the pre-symbolic possibility of resisting and opposing the phallogocentrism of patriarchal language. This is perhaps the only objection I have against Gyga's work, for I find Kristeva's notion problematic for its internal incoherence, as I shall explain below.

On the other hand, Gyga aptly builds on Celeste Schenck's "feminist genre theory", which to my mind is extremely adequate for exploring Stein's texts. Schenck characterizes the implications of traditional genre theories as "gendered" because underlying their will to taxonomize one finds the exclusion of those literary forms which do not fit into the established categories (just as women have been excluded from the domains of Reason and thinking and turned into the "Other"). Another gendered implication of traditional genre theories is their "fetishizing of aesthetic purity" (as cited in Gyga, 2) whereby genres should be pure and clearly distinguishable from each other, "like biological genders". "Mixed, unclassifiable, blurred, or hybrid genres" (Ibid.), as Stein's works seem to be, are problematic and defy classification from a canonical perspective. The critical reading of her texts presumably grant us the ability to ascertain to what extent her challenge of classical generic categories actually responded to her marginalized position and performance in society as a lesbian writer. But was she conscious of this connection? Did she intend to subvert the phallogocentric features of language in her violation of dominant generic codes? These are issues that Gyga raises in the course of her study.

It has become increasingly clear that Stein's extreme linguistic experimentation and her particular re-writing of literary genres —actually "her reluctance to yield to any kind of generic classification" (4)— place her closer to Postmodernism than to Modernism, since she held an advanced position within Modernist aesthetics itself. In this respect, Gyga proposes to "explore the psychosexual structures of [Stein's] texts in relation to her specific sexuality" (Ibid.). This guiding principle, however sound in its formulation, presents the obvious epistemological problem of determining which one Stein's *specific sexuality* was. As recent research has shown, concepts such as sex, sexuality, subject, self, identity and so forth, are susceptible of being recast and reposed continually. They are constantly subjected to scrutiny, therefore the evident difficulty in working through such an uncertain notion as someone's *specific sexuality* or *sexual identity*. In the case of Stein this matter is particularly worrying for, as Gyga readily argues, "Stein's ego was male-identified" (5). The complex network of forces operating within Stein's books (gender —social identity— private subjectivity) makes it even harder to discern her sexuality in absolute or abiding terms.

While I subscribe to the term "Antilanguage" as an apt definition, although certainly not the most accurate, of Stein's style, I do not however share Gyga's reliance of French-language feminist theoreticians such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. Even though Gyga herself cautions against the "essentialist dangers lurking" (5) in their theories, she nevertheless adopts Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as a powerful resource to analyse Stein's writings, despite the French author's privileging of masculine authors. Gyga deems essential to conflate this theoretical

approach with an analysis of the historical circumstances that surrounded Stein during her lifetime. It seems to me that the author should have clarified whether her approach is strictly linguistic, as her contemplation of Kristeva's theories indicates, or sociological. Moreover, the particular domain of Kristeva's notions renders incompatible the application of her thought on language with the study of the social conditions under which a given author has developed her work, owing precisely to the acultural and ahistorical nature of the French author's conceptualization of the Semiotic (deployed mainly in *Revolution of Poetic Language*). She further invokes Kristeva's remark about homosexual women as the only ones capable of "overthrowing the socio-historic order" (that has reduced women to the category of non-subjects) without having to sacrifice the use of language and, consequently, the ability of representing themselves. For Gyax, Stein's literature exemplifies the subversive force of women's language necessary to make one's identity prevail, even if to achieve this aim she must accept the demands of patriarchy and remain constricted by its injunctions. This is the main reason why she holds onto Kristeva's belief in the subversive potential implicit in "feminine" texts, apparently overlooking the fact that Kristeva herself found exemplary of this "femininity" the poetry of masculine writers such as Mallarmé and Lautremont.

In order to explicate Stein's deconstruction of traditional genres, Gyax relies, conveniently but inevitably, on the author's own theoretical writings, if one can apply this category for, as Gyax indicates, Stein's essays exemplify her refusal to obey the rules about this, and all, genres. In this guise, her essays comprise as much her views on theoretical notions as references to biographical aspects. Likewise, other texts, supposedly autobiographical, incorporate Stein's thought on literary issues. *How To Write* (1931) and *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) represent these two types of writing. Gyax relates this mixing or blurring of genres and, namely, Stein's disregard of the typical taxonomies, hierarchies and structures imposed by conventional genres, to "the way(s) gender is inscribed in her texts" (8). She tries to substantiate this thesis exploring different texts which show Stein's dismissal of specific generic conventions. For instance, chapters 1 and 2 deal with two novels, *The Making of Americans* and *Ida: A Novel* respectively, which do not conform to classical narrative patterns. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 discuss Stein's re-creation of the drama genre and its relationship with the notion of the lesbian subject. Part 3, which comprises chapters 6 to 10, approaches Stein's autobiographies and biography, highlighting the ways Stein represents her "Self" in the context of the interrelationships with other "selves", thus rebelling against the Humanist conception of subject as originator of all meaning and value, placed at the center of the narrative.

Finally, Parts 4, 5 and 6 analyse the detective story *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, the poetic work *Stanzas in Meditation* and a children's book, *The World Is Round*, using a similar approach to that used in the precedent chapters.

Gertrude Stein's amazingly vast production constitutes an ongoing and never ceasing wellspring of critical studies, biographical surveys and textual examinations. Bearing in mind the profundity and consistency of Stein's overall production, one has to assess Gyax's work as undoubtedly a valuable one. Indeed, Stein's books are inaccessible without a thorough familiarity with the fundamental tenets she developed throughout her work and the epistemological keys that help spell out its intri-

cacy. Gygax's book unravels some of the mysteries Stein left as if to puzzle her readers. It is evidently addressed to specialised scholars and critics, who may benefit from it in so far as the critical bibliography available on Stein is mainly focused on the modernist, experimental and, of late, postmodern character of her work. Recently, feminist literary critics have attempted to reveal the supposedly woman-centred elements of Stein's writings which, although as legitimate an approach as any other, cannot, however, elucidate Stein's thought entirely. Gygax has tried to go beyond the limited scope exhibited in some feminist studies and modernist criticism alike. She has tackled the issue of gender and genre from a critical perspective that, if not managing (but neither desiring) to "explain" Stein's literature, at least illuminates some of the most obscure parts. In this respect, Gygax pays the same analytic attention to each text, sharing Marjorie Perloff's view that all Stein's texts must be read with the same dedication and simultaneously disallowing the popular notion that Stein's writings can be unproblematically divided into easy or "transparent" and difficult or "opaque" texts (Perloff 145-6).

This book provides a comprehensive reading of some of Stein's works (to attempt all of them would have been both illusory and unwise) and evidences its author's sensibility and intellectual capacity to probe Stein's mind throughout her texts. Her interpretive procedures result in a generally well-constructed criticism of Stein's particular handling of genre and gender issues.

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\* Gygax, Franziska. *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*. Westport (CT)/London: Greenwood, 1998.

### Works Cited

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