WOMAN AS EROS-ROSE IN GERTRUDE STEIN’S TENDER BUTTONS AND CONTEMPORANEOUS PORTRAITS

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As the blind glass of the opening still-life of Tender Buttons, Gertrude Stein presents herself like the Greek seer Tiresias. She is our prophet, our Sibyl. And like Tiresias and the typical Sibyl, she is of ambiguous sex. While clearly female physically in real life, Stein thinks of herself as male in the great poetry of her 1913 Tender Buttons—one of the keys to this work that many baffled readers have missed. Earlier, in fact, in Stein’s lesbian-autobiographical novel Things As They Are, Adele Stein actually exclaims at one point,

“I always did thank God I wasn’t born a woman.”

In “Objects,” the second section of the triad “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms” that comprise Tender Buttons, Stein intends to view simultaneously, both subjectively and objectively, the world “out there.” Understandably, things nameable emerge on her writing tablet in a complicated form. One half of Stein partakes of, yet criticizes, the hard handsome glory of the male spirit dominant in the second still-life of Tender Buttons, GLAZED GLITTER. But Stein’s second half feels the debasement, yet soft sensual appeal of the female, seen in anthropomorphic, dualistic thinking as matter itself, and objectified in A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION, the third still-life of “Objects.”

Characteristically, while the Sibyl takes an intellectual stance, she is not sexless; instead, knowing herself erotically drawn to women rather than to men, she comes into the position of Sappho. And the Sapphic passion—in Gertrude Stein’s case her desire for Alice Toklas—is one of the ecstatic messages expressed cryptically in the tiny exploding still-lifes and in similar imagistic passages within the more abstract meditations of Tender Buttons. For while the sheer poetry of WATER RAINING, A PETTICOAT, RED ROSES, A SOUND, and multitudes of other little poetic bursts can be interpreted in a single dimension as statements about Pragmatic philosophy, often they also present fleeting insights into the charms of the female human being; and these erotic preoccupations emerge in phrases, lines, sentences, paragraphs, everywhere, just as Freud in The Interpretation of Dreams found human desire all-pervasive in the human unconscious. And if Gertrude Stein, Sibyl and Sappho both, thus mixed abstract philosophy with concrete poetry, it was inevitable. For Stein’s chief endeavor in writing Tender Buttons was to effect a reconciliation between the competing claims within her of thinking and feeling, of the dualism in her own subjective being that she projects onto the shifting external objects of her contemplation.

To study Gertrude Stein’s imagery presenting woman as aesthetic object in Tender Buttons, I will for the moment concentrate, with grossly simplified poetic analysis, on a single poem, one that seems among the least obscure and is certainly among the most charming.

A PETTICOAT
A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (471)

There happen to be exactly 17 syllables here, as in the Japanese haiku, if one counts the title as part of the poem—which of course one does not do in haiku, since haiku usually lack titles. What is important is that, like haiku, Stein’s poem uses the juxtaposi-
tion of ideas and the connotations of words to create the message, rather than cause-and-effect logic. At first glance A PETTICOAT appears to promise a series of qualities defining a woman’s undergarment, but a second look shows a certain light-hearted confusion—for an ink spot is not typical of petticoats! An ink spot is a sign of soiling, however, casting a blight on the white purity of the woman’s intimate apparel, and perhaps by association, therefore, with the virtue of the woman’s body beneath the petticoat too? Or is the implication that using ink, perhaps writing or the profession of a writer, damages a woman’s femininity, signified by her rosily charming undergarments? The poem insists that some disgrace is involved in petticoats, or at least in one of these items. There is clearly what one almost always has in Stein: a riddle, a mystery—even an implied narrative.

From a strictly external view, the poem has the air of a perfect little song. The accented syllables of the title A PETT’I-COAT’ and of the last phrase “a ro’sy charm” are identical, as are the intervening three phrases, “a light’ white” and “a dis’ grace” and “an ink’ spot” so that the whole can be thought of as either linear or circular, or both. And when finally the lost pattern of the title comes back in the final phrase, we breathe a sigh, fulfilled by the perfection. Assonance working behind the scenes along with alliteration gives the flounces needed to create the pretty petticoat.

Of course there is much more to A PETTICOAT than mere sound-charm. The sound-charm (magical incantation?) reflects the sense charm, ready to be fathomed. A petticoat is a little, light thing, a “female” thing as opposed to a big heavy garment like a male’s overcoat; it is, moreover, an undergarment, an appropriate metapor for the more protected sex. Read in the context of its surrounding poems in Tender Buttons, AN UMBRELLA (an object which also flares out roundedly) and A WAIST (here described as gliding in slim charm like a star), the femininity of the petticoat is strengthened all the more.

A PETTICOAT begins with the phrase “A light white.” What is the meaning here? The allusion may be to difference itself, with the reader’s attention drawn to the fact that “white” is not merely an abstract idea, but exists in many different particular white things. Or perhaps as she often does, Stein is transferring a word or part of a word from its own place to another; and if she is using such a device here, “a light white” might be “a white light,” perhaps a spotlight, or just a white dot or spot to contrast with the third phrase of this still-life, “an ink spot.” As it happens, the still-life directly preceding A PETTICOAT ends with the word “dot.” Such trails, like the fact that the poem directly following also contains the word “disgrace,” must be followed as one unwinds Stein’s twisting threads. Some appear less significant than others, but there is no avoiding the all-pervading color symbolism of Tender Buttons.

Returning to the idea of different shades of white, we might discover “cream” as one of the possibilities. Cream is not pure blazing white, but a yellowish-white color; it happens to be one of Stein’s code-words for the delightful and fulfilling life. Associations with cream—milk, ice cream, custard, cows, the country, meadows, milking stools, even roast beef (the cow cooked) in Stein’s writing signify hedonistic pleasure, both sexual and gustatory ecstasy: the joys of living. Hedonism and delicate, flippant joy in hedonism were expressed to perfection by writers in Stein’s favorite period in English literature. Robert Herrick also wrote of petticoats and the disgrace of “a sweet disorder in the dress.” Stein’s vocabulary in A PETTICOAT, both in word and thought, is interestingly similar to Herrick’s, and his telling young women to gather rosebuds while they may in “To the Virgins to Make Much of Time” reminds one of Stein’s virgin in IN BETWEEN, which deepens the erotic level
of A PETTICOAT (brackets below give my suggested reading):

IN BETWEEN

In between a place and candy is a narrow foot-path that shows more mounting than anything, so much really that a calling meaning a bolster measured a whole thing with that. A virgin a whole virgin is judged made and so between curves and outlines and real seasons and more out glasses and a perfectly unprecedented arrangement between old ladies and mild colds there is no satin wood shining. (472)

[“In between a place” (place of delight; also, place is a chime for “Alice” “and candy” (the sweet of desire) “is a narrow foot-path” (a difficult place to travel) “that shows more mounting” (reference to mounting excitement, or mounting as taking a sexual position) “than anything. . . .” The “bolster” can be “the bold sister”; also, might be an age reference to Gertrude and Alice, several of which occur within Tender Buttons, whom Gertrude alludes to as “yellow” or “mellow” or as “mutton” rather than lambs in MUTTON; this poem in fact ends on the age question, with allusion to Gertrude and Alice’s “perfectly unprecedented arrangement,” which differs from one made between “old ladies” (sexually cold, presumably) and the hotter one between women like Stein and Toklas as “mild colds” (only mildly olds). “A whole virgin” (an intact virgin) is judged “made” (maid; also, made a virgin, but “undeveloped” voluntarily). Stein plays throughout with the idea of “wholeness,” “holeness,” and perhaps even “holiness” and “evil” if the “satin” in the last phrase is Satan.]

Another suggestive little scene, here of intercourse and its aftermath, occurs in RED ROSES, the poem directly preceding IN BETWEEN:

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot. (472)

[Something “red” (code word for woman, with the “something” here her private part; could also refer to male’s organ) that was “cool” (not stimulated) “rose” (became excited and swelled; if male organ, became erect) while “a pink” (one person’s pink part, lips or nipple or finger-“pinkie” or private part) “cut” (inserted itself into) “pink” (another’s intimate body part). There was a collapsing (emission and/or deflation), and “as for the old hole, it was a little less hot after that”; or there may even be an obscene reference to “old ass hole.” (I will not go into matter here, but Stein matches Joyce’s early scene in Ulysses that shows Leopold Bloom performing his bowel functions with her Tender Buttons poems A BROWN and A PAPER.)

The poem that follows IN BETWEEN and RED ROSES is called COLORED HATS, and may be one of the clearest references in Tender Buttons to the trip to Spain that Stein and Toklas took as Gertrude ran away from the strained situation with Leo at their apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus and tried to decide what to do. Avila was one of the places that Stein and Toklas visited and loved, and Avila is a place that happens to be famous for its colored hats. In Avila Camilo José Cela writes

In the regions of Barco de Avila, Piedrahita, Hoyocasero—and occasionally in the city itself—we can still sometimes see women wearing the pleasing gorra of curled straw. It is a tall helmet-like hat adorned with different coloured wools . . . of material coloured according to a woman’s condition. If she is a spinster the material is green, red for a married woman and black for a widow. It is curious to notice how often in their dress we see Castilian women wearing some adherence to colours indicating virginity, married state or widowhood . . .

With this in mind, one reads Stein’s COLORED HATS with new understanding, finding in the poem meaningful references to women’s married-state conditions like pregnancy (“broad stomachs”) and childbirth (“the least thing is lightening”) and to their virginity-associated conditions like menstruation (“custard whole”). One even sees a reference in COLORED HATS to the virgin “Saint Teresa, the ‘Little Flower’ who is
everywhere worshipped in Avila, as well as a jocular reference to Louisa May Alcott’s virginal Little Women and perhaps even to Pearl, the sinning Puritan Hester Prynne’s bastard child. (In this quotation my interpretations occur within the quoted poem itself, enclosed in brackets. To making reading easier, Stein’s own words are italicized.)

**COLORED HATS**

*Colored hats are necessary to show that curls [“girls,” indicated by a rhyming word and also by association of “girls” and “curls’] are worn [worn out, exhausted—what Stein had observed as a medical student helping to deliver babies] by an addition of blank spaces [extra spaces, thus pregnancy], this makes the difference between single lines [virgin’s lines] and broad stomachs, the least thing [the baby] is lightening [makes the mother weigh less when it is born], the least thing makes a little flower [a little flow-er of water and blood, as well as a little flower or bud-baby, one sainly like St. Teresa] and a big delay [de-lay, pun of the lengthy laying-in process of birth] a big delay that makes more nurses than little women [children, virgins, also women little again after childbirth] really [materially, factually] little women. So clean is a light that nearly all of it shows pearls and little ways [weighs, weights, reference to matter]. A large hat is tall and me and all custard whole. (473)

The allusion to children in COLORED HATS, the little things that lighten broad stomachs, is repeated two poems later in A LITTLE CALLED PAULINE, where Stein announces that a “little” (a baby) called by any name whatsoever “shows” (signifies) 1) mothers (half-rhyme with “shudders”), 2) udders (perfect rhyme with “shudders’”), 3) shudders (literal quivers in Stein, who while assisting in the delivery of babies as part of her medical training had been so appalled at the process of childbirth):

**A LITTLE CALLED PAULINE**

A little called anything shows shudders. . . . (473)

To return however, to the comparative innocence of PETTICOAT. Besides femininity, A PETTICOAT features another important Stein theme: her writing. This is the idea behind “an ink spot” (both pubic hair and “ink’s pot”) which leads ultimately to the relief of “a rosy charm.” Alluring in her saucy undergarments, Miss Alice Toklas is a light white or white light beacon. She is also a disgrace if the world sees her as what she is, Gertrude’s lesbian lover.

To support this contention and my interpretation of the petticoat poem, let us look at female figures in the portraits written at the same time of Tender Buttons. In many of these portraits Alice Toklas is the heroine who comes to “save” Gertrude by her loving support and her erotic charms which awaken Stein to the poetry of life. Naturally, images of woman as eros-rose, Beauty, are more indirect in Stein’s Tender Buttons, which seeks to personify through objects, than in her portraits, which attempt to render living people. The images of erotic woman in the portraits, while still disguised through obfuscating language, should be relatively easy to fathom, but for many critics this has not been the case, and many do not locate Alice Toklas behind all the multiple-image temptresses “Susie Asado” and “Preciosilla” and as the fellow gypsy with Gertrude Stein in “A Sweet Tail (Gypsies).” Richard Bridgman even discounts Carl Van Vechten’s suggestion that the famous flamenco dancer la Argentina was one of the female images behind these portraits. Similarly, other excellent critics such as Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy,* James Mellow in *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company,* and Wendy Steiner in *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein,* all appear confounded because there may have been more than one dancer seen by Gertrude and Alice in their wanderings in Spain when the portraits were written, or for other overly-specific reasons. However, if one
allows that multiple, ambiguous identifications are true, but that behind them all is invariably the figure of Alice Toklas, everything falls into place, and one can relax and attend to Stein's experiments in these portraits and in *Tender Buttons*, where Gertrude Stein tried in words, like her Cubist friends in their medium, paint, to render the rhythms, sounds, shapes, colors of the external world.

In "Susie Asado" Stein gives us, in one erotically pulsing woman, a nursery rhyme tea hostess, a chirping bird, a Japanese geisha, a Spanish dancer clicking her heels down in a silvery-lit Madrid night spot or "cellar," a witch from MacBeth, an incubus riding a victim, Alice Toklas as Gertrude's "sweetie" or "Sweet T[oklas]" serving tea at 27 rue de Fleurus, and many other versions of all the beckoning desirability of Nature seen as female Being. Here in its entirety, with selective decodings, is "Susie Asado," wherein Stein presents one of her most vivid images of woman as enchantress, yet combines this with a possible philosophic questioning about the nature of matter and even a suggested solution to the problem of human suffering (again, brackets are my hints on a reading, and to aid the reader I have italicized Stein's own words):

_Sweet sweet sweet sweet tea._

_Susie [Jewsy, choosey, choose me] Asado [as I do].

_Sweet sweet sweet sweet tea._

_Susie Asado [Mikado, the Japanese geisha reference].

_A lean on the shoe [the Spanish dancer, perhaps la Argentina] this means slips [lips] slips hers [slippers].

_When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow, it is a silver ["la Argentina," "the Silver one" ] seller.

_This is a please [request] this is a please [appease], there are the saids to jelly ["jelly," a black jazz word referring to Jellyroll Morton who played piano in a brothel, was a code word for intercourse in Stein's story in *Three Lives* about a black girl named Melanchta; also here are the jelly and the "he said, she said's" of the ladies' tea party]. These are the wets [wets, sweets] these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy [inky].

_Incy is short for incubus.

_A pot [pot, spot, belly]. A pot is a beginning of a rare bit [rearbit] of trees [cheese]. Trees [also tease] tremble, the old vats are in bobbles [bubbles, bubbling vats of Macbeth's witches, women as creators of magical brews], bobbles which shade [spade] and shove [shovel] and render clean [rend her clear], render clean must.

_Drink pups [drink ups: kisses, suckings].

_Drink pups drink pups [The doubling here, as in other Steinian words and phrases and lines, creates mutual participation] lease a sash hold, see it shine and a bobolink [woman as bird, a favorite Stein association] has pins. It shows a nail [an "ale" as intoxicating beverage brewed by witches; also an "ail," a pain of sentient desire].

_What is a nail ["a nail"] can be an ail," so that Stein asks, "What is an ail?" or "What is a feeling of pain? What is sensation?" These are favorite questions of the Gertrude Stein who studied philosophy with William James. Also, these words may be read in another Steinian way, as making a statement of definition of the word "what," or "matter, substance." Stein tells us in that way of reading the sentence, "‘What’ is an ail," meaning that the philosophic questions concerning "whatness, substance," are an ail, a painful problem, for us humans].

_What is a nail [Stein repeats her phrase, underscoring her point, or forcing us to shift ground, cubistically, to constantly new views of the words’ possibilities. Stein could be asking simply about a materially substantial "nail" with a specific function, a pointed object the purpose of which is to join substances together]. A nail is unison [union; Stein answers her own question, as she will ultimately in *Tender Buttons*, by combining intellectual meaning and sentient drives in humans and all nature. The answer favors unity, yet there are a plurality of strands being united, not a dualistically conceived mutually-exclusive spirit or matter. The solution is Pragmatic, joyously sensual, celebrating eros and woman]. Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea [Stein ends by drinking the wishes'
delicious poison offered by her bewitching Alice]. (549)

“Preciosilla” is another rhythmic marvel, ending with the same dark-skinned (“toasted”) Susie, Gertrude’s “Jewie” (her pet name for Alice), her “precious silly,” again her favorite “cream” dish or dessert after she has told brother Leo, now no longer a member of the household but an unwelcome guest, to “Go”:

... diamonds white, diamonds bright, diamonds in the in the light, diamonds light diamonds door diamonds hanging to be four, two four, all before, this bean, lessly, all most, a best, willow, vest, a green guest, guest, go go go go go go go, go. Go go. Not guessed. Go go.
Toasted susie is my ice-cream. (551)

The dancer in the companion portrait to “Susie Asado,” “Preciosilla,” does more than dance. Bait, Preciosilla’s clothes are torn off, and she is urged towards a “single mingle,” union, in the third paragraph:

“Bait, bait, tore, tore her clothes toward it, toward a bit to ward a sit, sit down in, in vacant surely lots, a single mingle, bait and wet...” (550)

This is obscene, as is the title of “A Sweet Tail (Gypsies)” obscene. And again in “A Sweet Tail” there is depicted what can be construed as an explicit scene of intercourse between two women (“curves”). “Hold in that curl [girl] with a good man,” Stein tells herself, assuming the male point of view, and teasing herself and us with all sorts of jokes and puns and meaningful suggestions involving holes in cheese, and pinnings, and a petticoat beloved, whom she urges to “come”; the portrait of the wandering lovers embracing even ends with the “dear noise” of orgasmic bliss:

Curves. Hold in the coat [goat, go at]. . .
Hold in that curl [girl] with a good man. Hold [hole] in cheese. . . A cool brake [“break” with Leo, again the invisible third party] . . .
Come a little cheese [please]. Come in to sun with holy pin [hole leaping] and have the petti-
coat to say [save] the day... a dear noise [an orgasmic moan, an “Adae” or “Ada(r)” noise, Ada being a code name for Alice in Stein’s writing]. (571-74)

Whether as the synecdochic petticoat who brings rosy charm at last to a disgraced Gertrude; or as the “Ada” who inspired Gertrude to write a loving portrayal of herself in Stein’s very first portrait; or as the “she” who comes bringing salvation to Gertrude in the revelatory portrait “Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother,” which documents Gertrude’s and brother Leo’s falling-out; or as the glittering dancer “Susie Asado” or “Preciosilla”; or as Gertrude’s fellow expatriate in Spain, one of the pair of Wandering Jews in “A Sweet Tail (Gypsies)”—in whatever shape or form she assumes, always behind Stein’s Sapfich and Sibyllic images of women at the time of Tender Buttons and the companion portraits blooms the eros-rose Alice Toklas.

NOTES

1 See Tender Buttons in Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein ed. by Carl Van Vechten, New York: Random House, 1962, 459-509. An excellent preliminary analysis of Tender Buttons can be found in Richard Bridgman’s Gertrude Stein in Pieces. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. To understand the thinking of Gertrude Stein, however, one should read William James’ Pragmatism along with Tender Buttons, for the philosophy of James, Stein’s teacher at Radcliffe, colors her thought throughout. One of the best articles on Tender Buttons is Neal Schmitz’s “Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: the rhetoric of Tender Buttons,” Journal of Modern Literature, 3 (1974), 1203-1218.


A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness... . .
A winning wave, deserving note,
In the tempestuous petticoat... . .

Like Stein, Herrick is suggestively fond of feasting with cream and other goodies. In “The Wake” (an annual parish festival) he urges his beloved to “Come, Anthea, let us two/Go to feast, as others do,” for “Tarts and custards, creams and cakes,/Are the junkets still at wakes...” 1005-6.
The inclusion of this note on a poet from English literature gives me the opportunity to point out how deep were Stein's knowledge of, and love for, this literature and the English language itself, which is why I chose to cite a large historical compilation rather than merely a volume of Robert Herrick's poetry. Stein read avidly and constantly in English literature, and the riddles of early English literature, in fact, provide one key to Stein's writing style, as do the classical rhetorical devices found so abundantly in Stein's particular passion, Shakespeare.

Stein's language experiments, it is true, usually follow thoughts metonymically rather than metaphorically, and so she often does the opposite of what medieval allegorists and nineteenth century Symbolists did. Understanding this is one of the keys to understanding Stein's writing. Study of Roman Jakobson's article on Aphasia is helpful here: see "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" in *Fundamentals of Language*, The Hague, 1956, 55-82, and the use to which David Lodge puts this material in "The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy" in *Modernism 1890-1930*. Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Ltd., 1976. In the end, Stein avails herself of a multitude of possibilities of thought and language extension, and to read her one must adopt an elastic approach.

3. Van Vechten's *Selected Writings* contains several of the Toklas portraits to which I will refer, "Susie Asado," "Preciosilla," and "A Sweet Tail (Gypsies)."