Playfulness and (Un)-performability in Gertrude Stein's Modernist Drama

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On peut étudier le théâtre de Gertrude Stein, un théâtre du modernisme, comme un exemple de dramaturgie expérimentale, en ce qu'il se trouve en suspens entre deux identités : celle du discours, et celle d'une partition théâtrale. Le présent article, qui se veut un examen de l'écriture dramatique de Stein en tant qu'exemple d'écriture moderniste, met le point sur les défis qui font de Stein une écrivaine essentiellement « anti-théâtrale » – une écrivaine qui n'est que très peu intéressée par la mise en scène. Quoiqu'il s'adonne instamment à des jeux de mots, à des répétitions, ainsi qu'à des constructions linguistiques tenant lieu de conflits dramatiques, de l'action et des personnages, le théâtre de Stein a néanmoins évolué vers une maturité de la représentation, qui se manifeste surtout dans la compréhension claire et limpide de l'espace et du temps à travers le contrôle de la langue, ainsi que dans sa focalisation sur l'expérience du présent par le spectateurs, qui ne se font plus distraire par la causalité linéaire. Même si l'époque de Stein lui offrait maintes occasions pour expérimenter avec le matériau et la forme de son médium, sa voix demeura essentiellement une affaire privée, et ses représentations théâtrales étaient, pour la plupart, des exercices ludiques plutôt que des défis de réalisation scénique. Tout de même, ses réarrangements textuels d'identités, d'espaces et de choses, qui font l'objet de divisions et de réadaptations perpétuelles, ont donné lieu à une tradition esthétique toute particulière, qui a laissé des traces visibles sur nombre de représentations formalistes modernes.

GERTRUDE STEIN / MODERNISME / PERFORMATIVITÉ / REPRÉSENTATION THÉÂTRALE / ESTHÉTIQUE DU PAYSAGE

STEIN'S DRAMATIC MODERNISM

"The whole business of writing", maintained Gertrude Stein, is the "question of living in … contemporariness" (Stein, 1974: 151). Burdened by the restraints of a past to which he or she can only have the imaginary

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claims of an objective transcriber, the writer feels a "resistance outside" and "inside", something like a "shadow upon you and the thing which you must express. At any moment that you are conscious of knowing anything, memory plays no part" (*idem*: 153). As early as the first decade of the twentieth century, Stein twisted dramatic language to its extremes, creating a radical form of *nonnarrative*[1], a kind of antitheater – to borrow from postmodern terminology – "making theatre out of the theatre" (Kennedy, 1975: 28) and voicing her metatheatrical concerns with an emphatic verbal eccentricity. Her interest in the medium set up a continuum of modernist experimentalism that produced valuable antecedents to the revisionist theories of performance in the American theatre of the 1960s onwards, lending a conceptual aesthetic to the work of avant-garde directors as established as Richard Foreman, Liz Le Compte and Robert Wilson, to name but a few, and to experimental playwrights, internationally. Yet, although Stein's proclivity to modernism in her fiction has been amply argued, theorized and documented, the modernist twist in her dramatic work has not received the same amount of critical attention, a fact that points to a more general unease in so far as dealing with modernism in the theatre goes. Martin Puchner, whose comprehensive study of dramatic modernism, *Stage Fright* (2002) – with a chapter dedicated to Stein – is one of the very rare scholarly works on the subject, probes into the problem and frames the question boldly: "must not the very term modernist theatre strike us now as an oxymoron" (Puchner, 2002: 12)? He recognizes, however, that it is the very resistance of modernist drama to theatricality, with all the ensuing tensions and complications, which has contributed a unique legacy to experimental theatre and performance.

Investigating some of the principal elements of modernism in Stein's dramatic oeuvre – with a brief reference to her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) – this paper argues that even in the context of Stein's apparent un-performability, one can still trace hints of a developing consciousness of the theatre medium, translated into patterns of innovative linguistic strategies affecting our perception of the "present moment" in ways completely absent from more traditional forms of drama. In her startlingly large dramatic output, Stein experimented with the various ways of rendering alive the human consciousness by means of objectifying it through language. Beginning her playwriting career already on the eve of the First

1 The term used by Ellen E. Berry to refer to a kind of "spectacular form ... [that] exceeds the realm of narrative and representation ... in favor of more visual and aural display" (1992: 144).

World War, immediately after the publication of *Tender Buttons* (1914), for the next two decades she also had a go at various literary genres, among which, fiction, poetry, "portraits", "landscapes" and "geographies".[2] Critics have found it convenient to classify her drama in three main groups, loosely bearing the labels of "conversation plays" (1913-1921), "landscapes", and, in the last period starting in 1932, "narrative plays". Stein's unique writing style, which bestowed upon her the title of a modernist par excellence, was shaped by a number of different influences: studying under the guidance of William James, she had come to view psychology, physiology and metaphysics as disciplines instrumental to the examination of consciousness and identity, concepts defining the work of other modernists – Proust, Joyce and Woolf among them. Her lifelong friendship with Picasso and her affinities with the Cubist movement in painting contributed significantly to her authorial signature, a kind of "painting with words", where simultaneous or undercutting verbal planes resulted in a destabilizing violation of perspective. Accommodating the style of subversion that her era afforded her, Stein developed a language in which words had "the liveliness of being constantly chosen" (Stein *apud* Robinson, 1994: 12). However, this ostensible predilection for vigorous verbocentric expression created immediate problems for her drama, functioning, as it often did, at the expense of character development, dramatic structure and theatrical space, elements conducive to the construction of a dramatic text as well as to a text's full stage realization. This type of neglect surfaces repeatedly in modernist drama, "a theatre at odds with the value of theatricality" (Puchner, 2002: 7).

Placing its emphasis on the desire to express the actual thing and not "its shadow", as a literary movement modernism strove to reach the point where knowledge rests on the perception of contemporaneity and not on the reproduction of the (fossilized) past. Modernist aesthetics addressed the question of how to retrieve time and the present and how "the anticipation of an undefined future and the cult of the new mean in fact the exaltation of the present", as Jurgen Habermas explored in his essay "Modernity – An Incomplete Project" (1980):

> The new time consciousness ... does more than express the experience of mobility in society, of acceleration in history, of discontinuity in everyday life.

2 Stein wrote approximately seventy-seven plays that remained unknown or unperformed during the largest part of her life, with the telling exception of *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927), which received strong critical attention when performed as an opera composed by Virgil Thomson.

> The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present. (*apud* Foster, 1985: 5)

Resisting memory and the past can be both a risk and a challenge for any author: the conscious decision to forego tradition and history anchors the achievement of the work upon a commanding immediacy, the ability to grasp and express the moment as it unfolds in time and the talent to make one's writing render this experience for an audience with validity. Some of modernism's main structural and aesthetic tenets consist in the search for the center, the rejection of peripheral *loci* of perception, awareness of the present as both a basis and a progression, of "timelessness" as grounded specifically in the fixity of "now", rather than as mere abstraction. The work of art is both finished and unfulfilled, because the ultimate stages of its completion are shaped anew by the expectations and constant re-evaluations of the individual reader.

This philosophical outlook permeates all literary genres. Yet, as has been already stressed, within theatre history scholarship, the concept of a "modernist theatre", or conversely, a "theatre of modernism" has not perhaps been adequately theorized, notwithstanding, of course, the associations that have been drawn with the kind of theatre Beckett produced in the fifties.[3] Nevertheless, modernism as a self-proclaimed literary movement in both European and American contexts had appeared long before the existentialist and absurdist preoccupations of Beckett, Ionesco and Albee. It dominated the intellectual climate of the early twentieth century, bringing with it sweeping changes not only in writing, but also in the reviewing of epistemology, life, art and society. Given that modernism and its impact seem to have emerged primarily out of the fictional and poetic inspirations of Woolf, Stevens, Pound, Eliot and others, one would naturally ask: "where is theatre?"

In response to this question, we might want to consider the presence of the American drama within this period to be able to safely assume that although of a less self-declamatory nature than the poets and fiction-writers of their time, contemporary dramatists equally contributed to the fundamental reconsideration of life and art that the era carried within it, the modern stage in the United States becoming an accommodating

3 Esslin actually locates the beginnings of Modernist drama in "the revolt of the romantics and their precursors against the classical tyranny of the unities and the Alexandrine ... essentially a revolt against worn-out forms" (Chefdor *et al.*, 1986: 60).

space for all the cultural trends imported from Europe.[4] Inspired intellectuals and artists were willing to write, direct and act in plays that raised timely issues and condemned their audiences' social and aesthetic inertia. At a time when the experimental theatre movement that had produced Antoine's Théâtre Libre in 1887 Paris, the Freie Bühne in 1889 Berlin, the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904 was gradually shaking the artistic complacency of the American writers and audiences, European touring companies cruised the States, as did the new publications on dramatic subjects. In 1912, the year that saw the official beginnings of the Independent Theatre Movement with Maurice Brown's Little Theatre in Chicago, Gordon Craig's book *On The Art of Theatre* spoke directly to the newly emergent American avant-garde. Daring the shaky foundations of David Belasco's iconoclastic realism, the little theatres scattered through the big American cities, readily espoused the modernist spirit manifest in the works of Alfred Stieglitz, the Cubist painters and the American Dadaists. Moreover, the European influences of Freud, communism, free love, the new woman and the new literature allowed for a long chain of intellectually inclined theatre groups to form. It was within that vibrant intellectual climate that Stein's writing came into being, defying most of the aesthetic norms of its time. While Futurism and Dadaism had already inscribed a new language and scenic space in the performative field, Stein was still at the forefront of all the revolutionaries to experiment so radically and across such an extensive body of work with dramatic language and structure.

LINGUISTIC IMMEDIACY AND THE "ETERNAL PRESENT"

There is no production record of Stein's first plays. In truth, when reading some of her early works one is still struck by their total lack of

4 In Europe, the revolutionary nature of the new theatre was shaped through the dramatic consciousness of inspired playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw and Strindberg, and equally, by the artistic principles of inspiring theatre practitioners. The concepts of a volatile theatrical space, an innovative stage of simplicity whereupon the actors' physicality would complement the authorial and directorial intentions were now clearly apparent in the imaginative contributions of Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, and Georg Fuchs, all of whom conceived stages "shorn of literal detail and rich in suggestiveness" and for whom "the evocative qualities of light constituted a major element in their determination and ability to simplify" (Feinsod, 1992: 29). With the new stagecraft theatre returned to its primary function, not merely as a literary construct, but significantly as a visual *locus* for the re-enactment of life's rites. Artists like Meyerhold, Reinhardt and Copeau at the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* postulated their interest in the eradication of the "parasitic" elements of performance, namely the blind adherence to an omni-powerful copyright-protected text.

performative insight. Yet, we should be able to acknowledge that her drama's linguistic structure does display a mobility, a maturation from the self-indulgent non-sequiturs of the early *Geography and Plays* ([1922], *What Happened*, *Ladies' Voices*) to the more visual compositions in *Operas and Plays* ([1932], *Four Saints in Three Acts*) to the coherent verbal performability permeating her final dramatic collection *Last Operas and Plays* ([1949], *The Mother of Us All*, *Yes is for a Very Young Man*, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*). Gradually, her syntax turns purposefully purposeless, her linguistic imagery surreal and vertiginous. As a result, drama becomes playful poetry composed of "riddles, songs, rhymes, puns, homophonic word play, secret codes, linguistic jokes, nonsensical but joyful word capers, and literary clues which tease us into false interpretive starts" (Bowers, 1991: 83). Drama, in this respect, fosters performative forms by putting words into action. Looking back at her early work, Stein recollects the time when she first began writing, describing her feeling that

> writing should go on, I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on which was at the same time the most profound need I had in connection with writing. (Stein, 1988: 217)

The sustained rationale associated with the constitutional re-evaluation of language seems profoundly justified. If writing should go on without intermission – because the writer's wish for continuity is ever more anxious as the ideas reveal themselves simultaneously and with a pitiless urgency – the interruption of authorial consciousness for the purposes of conventional punctuation seems an act of sacrilege, particularly when one considers the effect of immediacy achieved through such linguistic barrage. By extension, one can only acknowledge the freshness and vigor of a language washed clean of all the ornamental redundancies that commonly distort the bare realities of the text. For all that, Stein's idiosyncratic style did not originate in an attempt to demonize punctuation or syntax: the attack on narrative coherence and cohesiveness is intertwined with the desire to re-vitalize the action and place it within an energetic present tense resisting the flow and rhythm of historical linearity,

as ordinarily expressed in conventional structure and dialogue. In doing so, Stein inadvertently infused a fundamentally static form with peculiar touches of performance-informed sensibilities.

Although Stein was in principle a fiction-writer and not a dramatist, in her series of essays *Lectures in America* she displayed a clear sense of what her artistic goals had been. Confident about her drama, she addressed its matter, answering questions about time, timing, sight and sound, emotion and nervousness, parallels between theatre and life, and the question of the relationship between reading and seeing a play. She argued that plays were "either read or heard or seen" and that "after, there comes the question which comes first and which is first, reading, or hearing, or seeing the play" (*idem*: 94). This nonchalant attitude towards the performance aspect of theatre no doubt underlines the complications of her drama. Her plays often display complete ignorance or conscious neglect of staging conventions, a fact further aggravated by the potent physicality of words, which stand out threateningly, upstaging rather than revealing the *dramatis personae*. In effect, "none of the words" are intended to suggest a context outside the text (Sutherland, 1951: 109). This assumption is perfectly substantiated in one of her early plays, *A Curtain Raiser* (1916), a tiny, whimsical exercise in numbers, performable only in the minds of the readers:

> Six.
> Twenty.
> Outrageous.
> Late,
> Weak.
> Forty.
>
> (*G&P,* 1993: 202)

Quite similarly, in the ready-made, isolated phrases of the *Exercise in Analysis* (1917), the numerically ordered structural divisions of the play do little to enhance the plot but play games with such a rationally ordered series (Dubnick, 1984: 55):

> ACT IV
> He will never be needed in the business.
> PART XIV
> He will never be needed in that business.

ACT II

He is ashamed of his message.

ACT III

She is ashamed of her system

(*LO&P,* 1995: 125)

Stein's early playlets are purely playful "plays", a play being "exactly that" (*GH*, 1973: 109), and also a reality in which "an end of the play is not the end of the day" (*idem*: 114). Therefore, the methods of linguistic subversion and disengagement on which the writer relies so heavily, the total obliteration of syntax and the carefully selected randomness of what Roman Jacobson terms "word heaps"[5] serve her intentions of disentangling theatrical experience from any illusionistic identification with reality, traditionally promulgated in the Aristotelian poetics. The repetitive, aggressive language that shutters all semblance of verbal communication is clearly a reflection of the modernist concern to emancipate form from those traditional patterns of speech that evidently no longer reflect the social and existential disjunctions of the present. But for Stein, there is more: she employs a language aimed to shake the putative audience's complacencies against an immobile, almost petrified background of "self--contained movement" – her plays being "static compositions", as she herself termed them; in this manner, she helps achieve a "continuous present", a union between the performer and the spectator, an "absolute present moment of perception" (Ryan, 1984: 13), the experience of the play as a *work in progress*. As Linda Voris explains, "by focusing on mutable, transitive relations, Stein explores the time sense of becoming, one in which the present moment is elided or never takes place" (Voris, 2016: xxxv) Thus, in Stein's mind, language, stripped down to its bare essentials, generates an impact of being in the moment, as the "carnality" of the words fuses with the *a priori* materiality of the more conventional elements of performance. Because language no longer serves plot or characterization, it works towards the direction of reducing the phenomenon of "syncopation", whereby "your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play" (*LA*, 93). Syncopation, describing "the inability of the static audience to merge at any point with a relentlessly moving reality on the stage" (Ryan, 1984: 44),

5 Jakobson defines the "words heap" as a "vocabulary without syntax, which occurs with the suppression of the linguistic operation of combination" (*apud* Dubnick, 1984: 56).

is now eliminated; what replaces the gap between the audience's perception of the enacted event and the event itself is the sense of an eternal present, of one all-encompassing time dimension, of memory – and hence, of the past – discarded in favor of the experience of the moment. The formalist preoccupations of such self-reflexive – and arguably self--indulgent – writing, the integration or infestation of speech utterances within the dramatic text is not, as e. e. cummings expressed, a pure subordination of the "meaning of the words to the beauty of the words themselves" (*apud* Robinson, 1994: 16); Stein's linguistic battlefield provides a structural field where the human mind or "entity", as she also calls it, is finally distanced from all external characteristics and retrieves its pure being thus far imprisoned in the social self, the human identity with all its predicaments. The retreat to puns, homonyms and heavy repetition encapsulates, as she explained in her essay "Composition as Explanation" (1925/1926), the essence of what we are. In fact, her "humor of destruction", in conductor Leonard Bernstein's apt description, "leaves the perceiver dangling, reeling, and grateful for the ictus that enables him to agree with organized chaos by the simple act of laughing" (*apud* Kostelanetz, 1990: 132). Indeed,

> Stein's plays represent people's verbal actions, their conversation, and she calls attention to the organic structures of human interaction by giving us nothing else which would distract us, such as the basic elements of plot and character. Taken out of their restrictive contexts, the utterances with which Stein fills her plays are freely valenced. While in a real conversation they would be tied down, here in Stein's texts they float free. The reader's mind is forced to associate, to guess, to hazard, and to hesitate, all the time noticing the many ambiguities of common statements. Stein includes phrases we've constantly met, but to which we rarely give even a full second's thought. (Watson, 2005: 58)

Even though the linguistic games continue well into her writing, in the late 1920s Stein does find ways of integrating them into more stageable material in *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927/1928). Her work, notably antitheatrical at first, becomes increasingly more performable, as she discovers the possibilities inherent in the specific communicative texture of drama. In examining the form and function of Stein's drama, one should always be aware of the cardinal questions that repeatedly arise in relation to the writing task of the playwright, essentially caught in the dichotomy

of the text as a piece of literature and its potential reconstruction on stage. The critic needs to account for the aesthetic tensions that seem to galvanize the writer's perceptions of the world towards specific stylistic choices. Writing for a particular audience is one of these considerations; narrative method is another. The fact that Stein's page world is dominated by a fragmented, disrupted language chain that crushes all semblance of causality and narrative flow generates a unique outlook on drama: if language *is* the play, words are stage properties pertinent to each production and characters are created and developed linguistically, their physical selves habitually subordinated to (their) speech. The renouncement of psychologically defined characters as well as the absence of any indication or mere suggestion of "actorly" considerations – as would be traditionally laid out in the play's *didascaliae* – yields a new type of "embodiedness", locked within the structure of language. The words become the agents of the performance, internalizing the functions of both character and actor.

THE PLAY AS VERBAL LANDSCAPE

Written as an opera libretto in collaboration with Virgil Thomson, who provided the musical score, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, first produced in Hartford, Connecticut in 1934, demonstrated that Stein was becoming more familiar with the complexities of writing for the stage. The minimal plot of *Four Saints in Three Acts* is one of the most prominent examples of a concentration on the process rather than on the end result, complying to one of the fundamental revolutions in modernist writing: namely, the view of the text as an unfinished product of imagination, a dynamic composition subject to changes according to the author's and the readers' (or spectators') recording consciousness. Here Stein attempts to resuscitate the fictional characters of St Therese and St Ignatius, turning them from imaginary verbal abstractions into actual stage figures. In doing so, she creates a landscape of burlesque, where the forty or so Saints move about clownishly, speaking the language that will bring them to life. As with other works of her "middle period", Stein called *Four Saints* a landscape:

> All the saints that I made and I made a number of them because after all a great many pieces are in a landscape all these saints together made my landscape ... A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a

> landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there. (*LA*, 1988: 129)

In some respect, the play is composed as a still arena for linguistic meditations on the part of the omniscient narrator-chorus (Stein) as well as for metaphysical reflections on sainthood, religion and simplicity. Yet, the spiritual significance of *Four Saints* serves only as a pretext for the playwright's experimentation with language and theatrical space. Although ultimately un-theatrically static, *Four Saints* grants its audience a spectacle replete with visual and auditory suggestiveness, without ever sacrificing structural and stylistic originality for storyline and emotional impact. Right from the beginning, Stein makes it plain that *Four Saints* will be a process of "writing up" the characters, an experience synchronically shared by both author and spectators. She graphically refers to the preparation for the characters' stage presence, insisting on its spontaneity:

> Four saints prepare for saints it makes it well well fish it makes
> it well fish prepare for saints.
> In narrative prepare for saints.
> Prepare for saints.
> (*LO&P*, 1995: 440)

Throughout the play, the need for contemporaneity has involved: a. the thorough breaking up of all conventional categories of acts and scenes and b. a language versatile enough to reflect on both the Christian symbolism that the theme requires and on the playfulness of the circus, a quality which Stein seems to favor, even as we are confronted "not by performing clowns but by talking saints" (Weinstein, 1970: 76). As a result, words, musical statements and verbal games create spatial relationships, frozen in the frame of the petrified landscape. Language defines objects. The intermingling of the physical and the verbal undermines the truth that "being and truth exist independently of discourse" (Pladott, 1990: 124). Illogical repetitions, counting games, graduated syntactic displacement and phonemic play (Weinstein, 1970: 76) build up a sense of environment for the presentation of the story, a certain kind of *jeu d'esprit*, where extreme stylization, once absorbed by the reader, creates an amusing, "domesticated familiarity" (DeKoven, 1983: 91); this particular practice of subversion certainly foreshadows the formal means that absurdist dramatists would employ some decades later, to overthrow the trite,

clichéd use of everyday language in order to recover its primary meaning. Although in *Four Saints* Stein stitches together set phrases randomly in an attempt to defamiliarize the innate grotesqueness of what is otherwise familiar, the result is more of a comic incantation, their very literalism often producing funny results (Dydo/Rice, 2003: 216):

> Scene V
> Saint Vincent. Authority for it.
> Saint Gallo. By this clock o'clock. By this clock by this clock o'clock.
> Saint Pillar. In the middle of their pleasurable resolution resolving in their adequate announcing left to it by this by this means.
> And out.
> Saint Chavez. With a plan.
> Saint Pellen. In sound.
> Saint Gallo. Around.
> Saint Pellen. In particular.
> Saint Chavez. Innumerably.
> (*LO&P,* 1995: 471)

In this light, although for Stein, the importance of the theatrical event consisted in detaching words from their trite or formal contexts (Stewart, 1967: 63) and pitting them against a static dramatic background in paradoxical, dynamic juxtapositions, her interest lay in a broader disruption of organic wholeness. Acutely aware of the illusory nature of sequential action and therefore wishing her characters to inhabit an abstract, almost conceptual, space where linear time would cease to exist, Stein subordinated dramatic action to the exploration of how objects moved in space, granting human entity the freedom to release itself from progress within and into history. Ultimately, in her *language theatre* there is no concept of individuality, a reflection of how invalid the Christian ideal of man as creator has become. As an underlying direction, the agents of the "action" are usually words rather than human beings.[6] With the sense of individual integrity so brutally at stake, drama opts for a whimsical linguistic disintegration. One may argue that the annihilation of all existing principles of structure and characterization was perhaps Stein's attempt to produce her own set of criteria for what makes drama compelling and

6 This applies less to her later plays, where actual three-dimensional characters occasionally appear.

potentially performable within a context of playfulness and semiotic immunity.

Although the writer insisted back in 1913: "I do not want plays published. They are to be kept to be played" (*apud* Kostelanetz, 1990: 128), the reality about the actual productions of her plays has been rather disappointing, especially when one takes into account the vast amount of drama that she had written. The antithesis that Stein confronted in her playwriting was that of the dramatist's ability and freedom to "play" and her "obligation to modify that play according to the norms and requirements of theatrical realization" (Bowers, 1991: 84). In other words, there is a marked conflict between the general dramatic assumptions about polyphonic signification and the wish on her part to do away with the rules of traditional theatrical semiosis. Rejecting the dichotomy between reality and illusion, which often results in prescriptive notions of the "inconsequential", the false, and the "untrue", stirs up a desire to set aside any relevant derogatory categories. It is Stein's erasure of dichotomies in most of her early drama that causes the relationship between the signifier and the signified to collapse. In the simplest possible terms this accounts for textual incomprehensibility: conventional meaning disintegrates because of the inherent instability of theatrical reference. Moreover, it enhances the effect of un-performability further: thematic discordance is often matched by a lack of the directorial purpose fundamental to the conception of a theatrical work. This said, defiantly, Stein's drama creates its own peculiar signs that reverse and subvert the order of the communication process, in a form wherein discourse creates and shapes reality rather than being shaped by it (Pladott, 1991: 123). In as much as Stein "impishly" capitalizes on the device of mirroring, she foregrounds the constitutive power of discourse in a radical inversion of habitual (and stable) reference (1991: 123).

After the Cubist prose work *Tender Buttons*, where she had entered space dynamically, articulating the relationship of the moving object to its still surroundings, Stein developed more fully a language of the current "now", reducing time to simple present and subsequently destroying history and narrative sequence as the dominating element in literature (Sutherland, 1951: 112). When applying some of modernism's principles in her drama, especially at its beginnings, Stein may have caught glimpses of the intriguing problems that her plays would present to her audiences, so far accustomed to more digestible theatrical writing. As she suggested through her work, such confidence in an undisturbed historical

continuity was presently utopic, if one were to consider that the postwar condition left little room for a complacent attitude towards life and art. It is certainly true that her drama, entertaining, chaotic and discordant, offered a stimulating alternative to more conventional forms of representation, becoming a forum for cautioning readers and spectators about the contradictions of twentieth-century society. However, the isolation of the dramatic piece from its theatrical habitat, new as it certainly was in the history of modern drama, was also problematic in being so untimely, considering that back in the early twenties, as it appears, the American theatre needed to structure rather than deconstruct its principles of performance. In effect, what the stage needed was not to be "de-theatricalised" but "re-theatricalised" (Dickinson, 1967: 289).

Whether or not Stein's language was adequately convertible into a meaningful theatrical idiom is ultimately a matter of individual speculation. The relatively limited existence of actual productions of her plays does not afford us many constructive comparisons. It is however the case that between her early plays and *Four Saints in Three Acts* there has been a notable shift in the direction of performability, an adjustment to the medium's inner logic, notwithstanding the reality that ultimately her drama has overall remained mostly a literary affair. Departing from the dramatic norm to create her own (modernist) canon and express "things deeper than form, of which form is a revealing attribute" (Dickinson, 1967: 309), Stein, without a doubt, was not the only American writer to question the dominant aesthetic ideology of *fin de siècle* America. Many of her contemporaries had also experienced the gap that existed between the changing conditions of modern life and the decorous representation of those conditions on stage. But the work Stein produced was important primarily because it made a strong cultural statement in legitimate artistic ways, revising and refueling dramatic language.[7] Benjamin's stipulation in 1936 that "the uniqueness of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (1969: 223) cannot be impervious to the awareness that existence in tradition presupposes a critical stance in

7 As expected, Stein's keen experiments in form generated further artistic impulses in drama. For instance, they stimulated the Expressionist works of Elmer Rice (*The Adding Machine* [1923] and *the Subway* [1929]), John Howard Lawson (*Roger Bloomer*, 1923), e. e. cummings (*Him*, 1928) and other plays of the twenties and early thirties. In addition, the prominent role and popularity occupied by the early Expressionist movies in Europe and America (see Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* [1925], *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* [1921], Murnau's *Sunrise* [1927], Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1927]) were based on similar techniques: extreme stylization, grotesque characterization, urban environment, fast-moving pace and staccato rhythm abounded in both films and plays. Just like the cinema, the theatre too was "fluid": it assumed the shape of the society that contained it (Rice, 1959: 296).

relation to its viability. Stein's disquieting dramatic artifacts were products of their fervent times, reflecting a tradition that was slowly giving way to new theoretical and epistemological assumptions. Further, by no means should we forget that Stein's voice was in essence a private one. Despite its modernist search for a dramatic discourse that would describe the fragmentary notion of knowledge and the individual's existential entrapment, Stein's drama remained unacknowledged during her life. Yet, its echoes seem to chime in some more recent theatrical modes, especially in those that exhibit the postmodernist obsession with the use of a dramatic language *per se*, as well as the incorporation of the "landscape aesthetic" in the avant-garde performance of the past few decades. One can certainly bring up the example of Robert Wilson's painterly compositions, as well as Richard Foreman's typical frozen *tableaux*, both of which define time and space in ways largely reminiscent of Stein's outlook on the theatre as a means to capture a fleeting moment. Analyzing Stein's impact on modern dramaturgy, Marvin Carlson traces the tradition of playwriting in the United States back to her landscape writing, examining how her essentially modernist *écriture* reverberates in the powerful mix of "actual physical landscapes of psychic projection with verbal langscapes" (*apud* Fuchs/Chaudhuri, 2002: 148).[8] Simultaneously modernist and postmodern, alternately centripetal and open ended, Stein's plays exploit the "non-signifying notion of art as endless … display that demonstrates an endless, de-sublimated spectacle cut off from all narrative ends" (*apud* Berry, 1992: 144). They also provide evidence for Lyotard's assertion that "a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern" (1984: 79). Stein's textual dislocations of selves, divided and redefined *ad infinitum*, break new ground in the stage representation of the subject. The multiple identities that speak confused, ahistorical narratives dictate the kind of minimalism designated by the theatre of Beckett and later, by Heiner Müller's fragmented pieces, and in the United States, in Adrienne Kennedy's racial vacillations, Richard Foreman's still compositions and Mac Wellman's word-games, among others. I would hasten to add Enda Walsh, Valère Novarina and Jon Fosse to the list, not in the least to argue that the outreach of her revolutionary form extended well beyond her national borders.

Ionesco's postulation in 1958 that "to push the theatre beyond that intermediate zone which is neither theatre nor literature is to restore it to

8 Carlson points out that Stein's plays are involved with spatial configurations of language itself that, like landscapes, frame and freeze visual moments and alter perception (*apud* Fuchs/Chaudhuri, 2002: 148).

its proper drama, to its natural limits" (*apud* Corrigan, 1963: 85) encapsulates the challenge for any playwright to strike the right balance between creating a dramatic text and representing it on stage with immediacy. Although Stein's "stageability" (Bay-Cheng, 2005: 20) is still a matter of debate, the writer being, in Virgil Thomson's opinion, a "literary woman interested … in the theatre as memory and idea" (*apud* Ryan, 1984: 34), certain elements of her nontheatre presently seem to have acquired the maturity and the timely quality that they lacked upon their original conception and are expressed in different ways in contemporary drama. The distinct model of dramatic modernism Stein produced set up experimentation with form as a canon in modern playwriting, opening up new vistas in the understanding as well as enjoyment of theatre textuality.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LA	*Lectures in America*
GHA	*Geographical History of America*
G&P	*Geography and Plays*
LO&P	*Last Operas and Plays*
O&P	*Operas and Plays*
HWW	*How Writing is Written*

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