Elisabeth A. Frost: „Replacing the Noun – Fetishism, Parody & Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons". In: *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, University of Iowa Press, 2005

1 "REPLACING THE NOUN"

Fetishism, Parody, & Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*

In "Poetry and Grammar," Gertrude Stein writes, "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing and wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun." Kin to her inimitable styles, Gertrude Stein's theories of the noun, and of language in general, are like no one else's, and *Tender Buttons*, which is like no other text, is Stein's great experiment with the noun. Stein challenges conventional models of signification and explores the relationships among language, consciousness, and sexuality independent of movements, programs, or manifestos — in fact, in divergence from most of the preoccupations of her avant-garde compatriots at work on seemingly similar experiments. For in the minds of its most important practitioners, the rhetoric of avant-garde groups of the 1910s and 1920s was linked to the rise of a powerful new technology. Whether in F. T. Marinetti's infatuation with the automobile and airplane or Francis Picabia's renderings of intricate mechanical designs, avant-garde artists (Futurist, Vorticist, or Dadaist) emphasized the seductive potency of the machine. By contrast, Stein's prose and poetry reflect not the forward thrust of the mechanical but a pace slowed by repetition; further, the recurring linguistic motifs in her writing center on domesticity, erotic exchange, and a fascination with ordinary objects. Stein's early interest in portraiture (along with her friendships with such artists as Picasso, Matisse, Picabia, and Juan Gris) links her work in the 1910s to Cubism and to collage, as well as to elements of Dada.[1] But the domestic motifs of *Tender Buttons*, and of Stein's other poetry, set it apart from the preoccupations of the modern sensibility, with its imagery of the train, the airplane, and the engine.[2]

Of particular significance to *Tender Buttons* is Stein's obsession with the noun. In distinction from the forward motion of the verb emphasized by both Marinetti and Pound, Stein's theories of the noun represent an entirely different sense of physicality, as well as of poetic language. Stein writes in "Poetry and Grammar" that "the noun must be replaced . . . by the thing in itself" (Stein, *Lectures in America* 246; hereafter *LIA*). *Tender Buttons* enacts a wish to get back to material experience in a gesture similar to Marinetti's lyric "obsession with matter." Yet Stein's preoccupation with replacing the noun, with substituting one "thing" for another, is more than a variation on the predominant avant-garde theme of materiality in the new art. To the contrary, the well-documented presence of lesbian experience encoded in *Tender Buttons* suggests an erotic form of substitution. It is this sexual inscription that concerns me here: *Tender Buttons* implements a linguistic strategy that I describe, in light of recent feminist theories, as lesbian fetishism — an anti-Freudian, and anti-Futurist, version of object-love. Stein's theory of the noun as loved object is the basis for an idiosyncratic avant-garde practice. Stein affirms the erotic charge of words and objects, contesting the presumption of sexual difference propounded in Freud's writings and in masculinist avant-garde rhetoric.

Drawing on debates in the new psychology, which fascinated her from her studies with William James onward, Stein selects as point of departure a philosophy that was indeed new — and certainly revolutionary — but which was largely rejected by avant-garde writers from Marinetti and Pound to Tristan Tzara, all of whom abjured the focus on personal subjectivity in the late Romantic sensibility. I assert that Stein's erotic investment in the objects named in *Tender Buttons* parallels fetishism as theorized by Freud. Stein's play with the materiality of language suggests what has been called the strategy of the fetishist, a double consciousness of something at once absent and present, of language as both symbol and object. As some critics have pointed out, "perversion" suggests choice — that of either a rhetorical strategy or, more sweepingly, an irreverent aesthetics. According to one definition, perversion involves "a mental strategy that uses one or another social stereotype of masculinity and femininity in a way that deceives the onlooker."[3] Similarly, in *Tender Buttons* Stein diverges from the Freudian notion of fetishism by using objects to parody the male fetishist's anxiety and disavowal, to attack rigid views of sexual difference, and to suggest the possibility of an object-love based on plenitude rather than loss. I argue that this alternative model of sexuality is the basis of Stein's revolutionary art.

If Stein's idiosyncratic visions are distinct from both Freudian and contemporaneous avant-garde pronouncements, they also diverge from the two predominant schools of thought advanced in what was then called the "woman movement." The first, social purity, asserted that women were morally superior to men, in the process disavowing the existence of sexual desire in women. By contrast, the second — "pro-sex" radicalism — opposed sexual repression and championed a woman's right to sexual pleasure.[4] The social purists saw women and men in terms of binary difference: they identified lust as a male quality opposed to women's more asexual, spiritual natures, while the pro-sex minority, whose roots were in the nineteenth-century free love and utopian movements, "challenged the identification of sexual desire as masculine" (DuBois and Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield" 16). Stein's erotic poetry clearly has far more in common with the sex radicals' new openness. Yet the sex radicals, like the social purists, hardly invited the liberation of "female inverts."[5] Even these most daring advocates of the newest brand of free love tended to reject "intense female friendships as adolescent" (DuBois and Gordon 18), and their strong ties to the new movements in sexology and psychology — including Freudian theory — led to heterosexual norms. Feminist radicals from Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin through Dora Marsden asserted only heterosexual desire as normal for females; as Linda Gordon points out, the "sexual revolution" of the 1910s in effect intensified taboos against homosexuality.[6] Stein's lack of identification with the woman movement (largely synonymous with the Suffrage movement in the 1910s and dominated by social purists) is thus hardly surprising.[7] Stein's "perverse" desire had no contemporaneous feminist exponents; in fact, it was the importance of child rearing that provided progressives with the rationale for education (including sex education) for women.[8] The opposing positions of purity and sexual radicalism effectively limited women to just two alternatives: heterosexual reliance on men or a life of abstinence. In this climate, Stein and Toklas adhered to a socially acceptable emphasis on privacy and opted for a pragmatic approach to contemporary views of same-sex relations.[9] Stein's poetry — particularly its treatment of words and objects — represents a highly private feminist liberation.

A number of feminist critics explore Stein's sexual motifs as a version of an essentialist "writing the body." Other critics have argued more convincingly, however, that for Stein, gender and identity are fluid. Stimpson provides insight into Stein's gender politics: Stein attempts to show how gender might be eliminated outright, its tropes and codes broken. *Tender*

Buttons offers us a degendered world.[10] Following this general view, I suggest that in *Tender Buttons*, as in much of her other prose and poetry, Stein plays with language, fetishizing the word to subvert gender division through the signs of a radical experimental language.

Stein's fetishization of the word offers us an early model for feminist avant-garde practice — and, as the last chapter of this book demonstrates, a highly influential one for recent poets. In this chapter, I first explore the various theoretical implications of Stein's replacing the noun, contrasting her practice to that of contemporaneous avant-garde pronouncements. In a second section, I demonstrate the ways in which Stein refutes the gendered narrative of Freudian fetishism through parody, and I link that parody to Stein's poetic experiments with language and her radical sexual politics in *Tender Buttons*. I argue that lesbian fetishism is the basis of Stein's linguistic practice, while Freudian (male) fetishism is the target of her parody. Stein's assertion of lesbian sexuality in radical new forms can be seen as the basis of an avant-garde poetics devoted to realizing a new subjectivity through a newly conceived word.

In the heady years before the First World War, male avant-garde writers from Marinetti to Guillaume Apollinaire and Pound tried to capture the speed of the new urban landscape, and, in particular, both Marinetti and Pound focused a good deal of their theoretical writings on the verb as poetic vehicle. Throughout his manifestos and polemical writings, Marinetti extolled dynamism, virility, and a technological sublime, calling for the new art to convey "the lyrical obsession with matter" and to embrace the project of capturing "the life of a motor, a new instinctive animal" to replace the outworn fin de siècle obsession with subjectivity. Marinetti's technical agenda for writers involved substituting mathematical symbols for syntax (to convey speed in written form) and using only the infinitive form of any verb (Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine* 92). His linguistic program also included abolishing adjectives and adverbs as superfluous and imprecise. Pound, borrowing from Marinetti, embraced the new sciences revolving around the concepts and uses of energy. In his manifesto "Vortex. Pound.," he declared that "The vortex is the point of maximum energy, / It represents, in mechanics, the greatest efficiency." In this same document, Pound headed one section of the manifesto "The Turbine" (*BLAST* 153). In poetic practice, Pound (influenced in this instance by Ernest Fenollosa) believed as well that superposition would transmit the engine's speed, and that "The verb must be the primary fact of nature."[11]

The Vorticist manifestos in the 1914 issue of *BLAST* curse "THE BRITANNIC AESTHETE" (15) and "BLESS ENGLAND, / Industrial Island machine," "FOR ITS SHIPS [and] PORTS" (22–23). "Machinery is the greatest Earth-medium," one manifesto declares (39). Praise for the matter of industry and technology in such rhetorical flourishes (advanced early on in T. E. Hulme's denouncement of Romantic "softness" in favor of the "hardness" of classicism) finds a counterpart as well in much Dada visual art. Francis Picabia's "Portrait d'une Jeune Fille Américaine dans l'état de Nudité" wryly replaces the female body with the more durable goods of nuts and bolts — a mechanism with the phrase "FOR-EVER" inscribed on its hexagonal surface. Picabia's machinist works, like Duchamp's readymades, revel in the intricacy of mechanical reproduction, as in the two interconnected cogs labeled "Femme" and "Homme" in "Machine Tournez Vite." Like other works of the period, this one slyly hints at sexual and psychological entanglement while replacing the body with man-made materials.[12] With characteristic irreverence, artists associated with Dada play with the inanimate as a substitute for human, flawed bodies, often in moments of sexual arousal.

Like visual artists of the 1910s, Marinetti and Pound linked their theories to a futuristic technology. Both writers also represented their new poetics as an extension of an improved biological essence — the male body as metaphor for a unique, modern form of reproduction that would happily sidestep the biological reproduction that depends on the *female* body. In the new world, masculine potency would eliminate the female and certainly the feminine. Marinetti provides a seminal metaphor for his concept of a timely, matter-loving literature: "Art is a need to destroy and scatter oneself, a great watering can of heroism that drowns the world" (97). Pound's new man of the vortex practiced a similar masculinized form of birth: "You may think of him as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting" (*BLAST* 153). Ironically, Pound saw the Futurism he was clearly indebted to as a failed, bombastic enterprise ("Marinetti is a corpse," he announced [154]) in which the male seed of creation was spilled and wasted: "Futurism is the disgorging spray of a vortex with no drive behind it, DISPERSAL." By contrast, the birth of the new would emerge from a vibrant tradition: "All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is pregnant in the vortex, NOW" (153).[13]

Marjorie Perloff describes the extraordinary optimism of these machine-age avant-garde stances which, in the case of both Futurism and Vorticism

(as distinct from Dada), preceded the First World War. These were visions in which the forging of new forms and the advent of liberating new technologies would extend human capacity.[14] By contrast, Stein was largely uninterested in the technological changes taking place in Europe and the West, drawing more (from her studies with William James and later in medical school) from the fields of psychology and biological science that, despite extraordinary recent developments, Marinetti labeled all but moribund.[15] In contrast to the speed and forward motion championed by Marinetti, Stein was fascinated with repetition and circularity, the retrograde motions Futurists and Vorticists combated with the powerful thrust of the contemporary. Stein's love of circularity acquired linguistic and sensual components that claimed poetry for her own brand of feminism: Poetry would be concerned "with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun" — that is, with substituting for the "name" of things words that would somehow, in an entirely different way from the methods of either Marinetti or Pound, "make it new."

Stein's attitudes toward the failings of more militaristic avant-gardist rhetoric is apparent in "Marry Nettie" (1917, in *Gertrude Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo; hereafter *GSR*), an amalgam of poem and disjunctive narrative, which sheds light on Stein's attitude toward Futurism in general and Marinetti in particular. The predominant feature of the title is Stein's feminization of the ultramasculine Futurist by means of the imperative to "Marry Nettie." Just as provocative is the statement "They don't marry," which, as Perloff notes, refers on several levels to Futurism: Futurism's rejection of the bourgeois institution of marriage was a hallmark of Marinetti's movement; the year 1916 offered Stein a bitterly ironic perspective on Marinetti's militarism afforded by the deaths of a number of Futurists killed in the war they had extolled; and, further, "They don't marry" refers to pairs like Stein and Toklas, barred from the institution of marriage by virtue of their illicit love. Perloff's reading situates "Marry Nettie" as Stein's counter-Futurist manifesto, in which "the day-to-day relationship" and "ordinary language" triumph over Futurist pretension.[16] I would argue further that "Marry Nettie" is a direct expression of Stein's disgust with the violence of the war the Futurists rallied for, and an articulation of the remedy of object-love. "Marry Nettie" lampoons warmongering and, refuting Marinetti's condemnation of "Amore," proffers an experience of the sublime based on shared domestic life.

In "SPANISH NEWSPAPER," Stein satirizes the workings of the new killing machinery: "A Spanish newspaper says that the king went to a place and addressed the artillery officer who was there and told him, artillery is very important in war" (*GSR* 310). The omission of a specific, identifiable place deflates the king's prowess and stylizes Stein's account, just as the obviousness of the officer's statement renders the newspaper account wasteful and irrelevant. Here and elsewhere Stein underlines the connection between the culture of war and a journalistic prose ("The soldier what is a soldier. A soldier is readily given a paper" [311]) that her own writing purposefully disrupts. Nonetheless, important artillery is quite capable of instilling fear and denial: "She said I was nervous. I said I knew she wasn't nervous. The dear of course I wasn't nervous. I said I wasn't nervous" (311). This "nervous" repetition reveals the dislocation, felt by both lovers, induced by the war — the result of a military technology.

What serves as comfort against the terror of war in "Marry Nettie" is the presence of objects — goods of the sort earlier celebrated in *Tender Buttons*, including food and clothing, elements of survival and aesthetic pleasure. In "A NEW SUGAR BOWL WITH A CROSS ON TOP," loving attention to an ordinary domestic object serves to deflect the "nervousness":

> We said we had it. We will take it to Paris. Please let us take everything.
>
> The sugar bowl with a cross on top now has sugar in it. Not soft sugar but the sugar used in coffee. It is put on the table for that.
>
> It is very pretty. (311)

The utility and the beauty of the object please and reassure; yet the link to food — sugar, being especially treasured in times of rationing — suggests that bodily sustenance and domestic detail are life affirming, in stark contrast to the hierarchy of organized violence. Against the carnage of the Great War, Stein offers the consolation of common objects and the private affections they signify. Pound satirized women and commodity. His "Women Before a Shop" reads: "The gew-gaws of false amber and false turquoise attract them. / 'Like to like nature.' These agglutinous yellows!" (*BLAST* 49). Stein presents shopping as a sign not of women's silliness but of succor. Shopping is linked to eating, and both to romance. The ironically titled "PAPERS" requests: "Buy me some cheese even if we must throw it away. Buy me some beets. Do not ask them to save any of these things. There will be plenty of them. . . . Will you give me some of the fruit. It is thoughtless of me to be displeased" (312). The passage sounds like a condensation of the "Food" section of *Tender Buttons*, but with the crucial difference of the implied mood of nervousness that pervades "Marry Nettie."

Rebelling against the hardships imposed by the war, the speaker mends the strained relationship by food shopping, reaffirming the most mundane ties of romantic life.

Linked to such basic acts of survival are names themselves. The text bears the subtitle "Alright Make It a Series and Call It Marry Nettie"; the issue of naming, of what the series will be called, appears immediately — a self-consciousness integral to Stein's theories of the noun. The question of names includes, of course, a partner, evoked in a highly efficacious marriage: "Marry Nettie. Which Nettie. My Nettie. Marry whom. Marry Nettie. Marry my Nettie" (313). In contrast to either Marinettian (or the sex radicals') cries for free love, Stein's command deflates the grandiose Futurist's name to a simple imperative to marry — anathema to Marinetti, who declared in "Against *Amore* and Parliamentarianism" that having

> watched the takeoff of a Blériot plane, panting and still held back by its mechanics, amid mighty buffets of air. . . . before so intoxicating a spectacle we strong Futurists have felt ourselves suddenly detached from women, who have suddenly become too earthy, or, to express it better, have become a symbol of the earth that we ought to abandon.
>
> (Marinetti 83)

Stein plays on Marinetti's name, creating the homey female "Nettie" from the male proponent of technological revolution. Her linguistic legerdemain suggests the love for language and names that *Tender Buttons* practices, reclaiming from the rhetoric of violence the force of a romantic sublime.

Stein's disgust with the public disaster of war is apparent in "Marry Nettie" in the attention to material sustenance in the private sphere of marital union and the love of both ordinary objects and the word itself. Yet even more markedly than in "Marry Nettie," the earlier *Tender Buttons* suggests a love of the object status of language and its relation to naming one's beloved. As many readers have shown, in *Tender Buttons* Stein substitutes private codes, predominantly of erotic experience, evoking, as in "Marry Nettie," domestic pleasures. In this respect, Stein not only suggests the sacredness of the private sphere but also signifies on a different register from that of conventional, instrumental language. Stein makes use of the plasticity of words, explores their materiality, their relation to the orality of speech; in *Tender Buttons* she "caresses" them as nonreferential objects. Stein challenges the very rules of signification, for while she refuses to abandon the symbolic function of language, she also evokes the pleasures of words as things. Accordingly, signification coexists equally in Stein's text with materiality.

This double experience of language, a poetic means of refusing to choose, contrasts with theories of the new forms poetry should take, as proposed by other avant-gardists of the period. In different ways, both Marinetti and Pound theorized a sort of hypersymbolic — a sped-up, mechanized poetic communication that gave primacy to signification over the materiality of language. In "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," a "whirring propeller" (replacing the Muse) inspires Marinetti in the poetics of matter. Although "an uninterrupted sequence of new images" will "destroy the *I* in literature" and "finally put matter in [its] place," the material of language itself is speedily dispatched, relegated to nothing *but* signifying: words are even to be eliminated altogether when possible, replaced by more efficient mathematical and musical symbols, or strung together in chains of analogies "condensed and concentrated into one essential word" (92–95). Less extreme in his poetic measures, Pound focused as well on the ideal of instantaneous transmission of information in poetry. The economy of Imagism ("direct treatment of the 'thing,'" employing "absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" [*Literary Essays* 3]) led to the more forceful vortex, which spun itself less through a poetic love of the word (as in the Tennysonian mode of savoring highly wrought, musical phrases) than toward the efficient conveyance of the signified by means of verbal superposition. Both approaches sacrifice the materiality of the signifier. At the other extreme, Tzara's Dada experiments championed radical nonmeaning, highlighting the absurdity of war and the nonsense of speech precisely through a renunciation of the signifying function of words. Stein rejects such models, for they all require a choice between the roles language plays. At once signifying and utterly palpable, Stein's words, like her objects, function on both levels addressed by these poet-theorists — the symbolic as well as the experience of rhythm and sound through the body.[17] In this way, and in contrast to her compatriots, Stein forges an avant-garde practice that claims an eroticized, material language for private "revolutions."

In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein describes this linguistic doubleness, focusing on the materiality of language and at the same time clarifying that her interest is not in an experience of pure sound (that would frustrate efforts to extract meaning) but in having it both ways. Stein relishes the symbolic function of words — the numerous puns and syntactic plays in all her

poetry reveal her fascination with the double potential of words to *mean* as well as to be *felt*. Yet in her discussion of the noun, Stein seeks to dislocate the relationship between meaning and sound so that, through a process of substitution, language becomes material. In her theory, one word-as-thing substitutes for another one whose meaning has been lost through overuse in expected contexts. In prose, this tiredness of particular words means that nouns are essentially uninteresting:

> A noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it. A name is adequate or it is not. If it is adequate then why go on calling it, if it is not then calling it by its name does no good. (*LIA* 209–10)

But in poetry, Stein's practice as she explains it is to make the named thing new by renaming it, or, rather, by circumventing the original name: "I too felt in me the need of making . . . a thing that could be named without using its name" (*LIA* 236). This need is explored in the new kind of poetry Stein was to write:

> And so in Tender Buttons . . . I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns, I knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something. (*LIA* 242)

Stein's interest is clearly in signifying — in engaging the reader in the process of "meaning something," not simply in the material pleasure of the signifier. As Harriet Scott Chessman notes, Stein said that making sense of language while writing is inevitable: "Any human being putting down words had to make sense of them."[18] At the same time, though, Stein refuses to give up the palpable existence of the noun as an object, physically felt: "poetry is . . . a state of knowing and feeling a name" (*LIA* 233). And to know and to feel involves not just the intellect, which responds to the symbolic, but the body and its passions.

The difference between poetry and prose is that poetry involves the state of being in love:

> if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the name of anybody one loves. And so that is poetry really loving the name of anything.
>
> (*LIA* 231–32)

Marinetti — enemy of "*Amore*," the force that "hinders the march of man, preventing him from transcending his own humanity . . . and becoming what we call *the multiplied man*" (80) — rejected any such open expression of obsession with "anybody one loves." Moreover, Stein's theory privileges the noun as loved object, and in this it is at odds with Marinetti's views that "every noun should have its [analogical] double" and that infinitives, not nouns, "provide a sense of the continuity of life" (92). For Stein, that continuity can be grasped only through repetition, by "loving the name of anything."

Yet the experience Stein describes is not just amorous. It is also fetishistic. If Stein distanced herself from Marinetti, her avant-gardism also distinguishes itself in relation to, and difference from, emerging Freudian narratives. As I will explain in the second part of this chapter, Stein was certainly familiar with Freud's theories, and the resemblances between Freudian fetishism and Stein's object love are striking. Although Stein opposed elements of this revolutionary new discourse (the gender specificity and heterosexism in Freud's model), her embrace of romantic love aligns her with the erotic investment crucial to Freudian theory. Stein was drawn to Freudian thinking (in contrast with both Marinetti and Pound) as a model for innovative poetic language. I argue that, in Freudian terms, words in Stein's practice function as fetishes: Just as the fetishist substitutes a newly beloved object for the "missing" phallus of the mother, in Stein's explanation a violent and persistent passion is invested in the name as substitute.

Clearly, "saying that name any number of times" is a favorite device in Stein's earlier poetry[19] as well as in *Tender Buttons*, which is all about names — the relationship between the things one loves (for Stein, the material world in general, and Alice Toklas in particular), and the names that they possess. This loving exchange of names — often in dialogic form — appears in much of Stein's erotic poetry. The final section of "Ada" ends with an encomium relating the acts of speaking and listening to love and both to endless, pleasurable repetition of the word of the beloved: "Some one who was living was almost always listening. Some one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was telling about being one then listening" (*GSR* 102–3). "Lifting Belly" similarly uses repetition and circularity to link language to both the loved partner — engaged in playful erotic dialogue — and the act of "lifting belly": "Kiss my lips. She did. / Kiss my lips again she did. / Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did" (19). Here "Lifting belly is a language. . . . Lifting belly is a repetition" (17), and such acts of circular definition give distinct pleasure. In the midst of sensual enjoyment ("It gives me a great deal of pleasure to say yes" [5]), the "name"

is invoked, along with the delectation of food: "What is my another name. / Representative. / Of what. / Of the evils of eating. / What are they then. / They are sweet and figs" (5). Such sweetness is wonderfully compatible with language: "In this midst of writing there is merriment" (54).

Passion makes poetry. In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein recounts the anecdote of her older brother who fell in love and, as comical as the resulting poetry was, "he knew the poem was funny but he was right, being in love made him make poetry" (*LIA* 236). Stein herself discovers, supposedly during the writing of *Tender Buttons*, that passion must be invested in the noun — and in the things one sees:

> I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry, I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it made the Tender Buttons, and the Tender Buttons was very good poetry. (*LIA* 235)

This emphasis on passion, as well as on names, clarifies the way we should read *Tender Buttons*: The logic of love in connection to words and objects makes good poetry. Stein didn't care for the simple act of using language merely to label (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 88–89), yet that Adamic role of words has little to do with loving the proper name of "anybody one loves."

Immersed in the amorous syntax Stein describes, we need to adopt an utterly unorthodox means of reading Stein's text — one that I liken to a strategy of fetishistic oscillation. In Freud's model, the fetishist, unable to accept the new knowledge of the mother's castration, selects an object to represent *both* the maternal phallus itself and, implicitly, its absence, evident in the act of substituting a shoe, for example, for the missing organ. The erotic investment in the fetish that Freud describes parallels Stein's relation to the "tender buttons" of language in her poem — whose opening section, we might remember, is called "Objects." The name functions as erotic substitute. Yet Stein resolutely refuses to choose between the registers Kristeva calls the symbolic and the semiotic, and in this respect her text embodies a fetishistic approach to language. Like Stein, we experience words as signs and material things at the same time.[20] Engaging with the necessarily symbolic nature as well as with the materiality of words — the pleasure they offer through the physical experience of speech — Stein makes her words into fetishes, linking questions of sexual identity to those of language and delivering a multiplicity of both sensuality and sense.

Stein's fetishistic desire for both the material and the symbolic in poetic language is apparent throughout *Tender Buttons*. The constant play between sensuality and semantics, materiality and meaning, begins with the title and the subsequent disjunction between headings and text.[21] As a title, *Tender Buttons* initiates the reader into the fetishistic strategy. The near paradox of a hard object that is tender is evocative on several planes. One apparent reference is to a domestic activity that seems to pay tribute to the Victorian sensibility: Just as boxes and dresses pervade Stein's "Objects" section,[22] so buttons are the implements of the feminine activity of sewing. At the same time, the plurality of these small objects suggests her words themselves, and perhaps even the multiple geometrical shapes used in Cubist painting. Yet these buttons also suggest sexual arousal, a body become multiple, pluralized, in pleasure.[23] The more conventional meanings cover the sensual one in Stein's displacement of the erotic onto the objective world, the fetishized buttons of her domestic landscape. The same strategy is effected linguistically by the back-and-forth between the headings and the text. For the most part, the headings bear witness to the transparent function of language; with a few exceptions ("A Little Called Pauline," "A Leave," "Suppose An Eyes"), objects are conventionally named in the headings. Oddly, though, they become the backdrop for disruptive texts in what would normally be a hierarchical relationship. Instead, the symbolic language in the headings merely provides the reader with a false sense of security, of stable ground that Stein will shift throughout the writing of *Tender Buttons*.[24]

Within the text, the essence of Stein's linguistic practice involves the experience of reaching after fact and reason and of discovering pleasure at the same time. In "A Substance in a Cushion," for example, the text can only be read by experiencing the materiality of the language at the same time as the multiplicity of possible significations at play with one another:

> A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed. The band if it is white and black, the band has a green string. A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing. (*TB* 462)

Here language functions under two imperatives — polyvalent signification and semiotic release, impossible to separate from each other. Moments of sense introduce speculative ideas: "A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed" raises the question of what it means to connect, in (or under) the bed or elsewhere, as well as the pervasive issue in *Tender Buttons* of embeddedness and enclosure. At the same time, the heading "A Substance in a Cushion" suggests needles and pins in their cushion (the passage contin-

ues, "The disgrace is not in carelessness nor even in sewing it comes out out of the way," creating syntactic ambiguity that multiplies meanings around the motif of sewing). The band surrounds a part of the piece of clothing, just as a sash (mentioned later) surrounds one's waist. Labor produces "a trimming" through arduous activity — "a little groan grinding." Briefly, then, the passage becomes a portrait of sewing. So the text is readable, or, rather, decipherable; if we want to push and pull at it, like a piece of cloth, we can cut it into shapes of meaning.

Yet these meanings cannot account for the materiality language takes on here. It is not simply that poetic devices create onomatopoeic effect or decorate a discursive content. Stein evokes the physicality of the words.[25] Rhythmic insistence and sonic repetition suggest sensual experience. As in some of Stein's other erotic poetry (such as "As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story" and "Susie Asado"), this section is propelled by imperatives other than those of semantics, particularly in the long final sentence. Stein orchestrates phonemic shifts through which sounds evolve and resolve: "sight a whole sight" lightens into the short "i" of "trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing," while the long "o" of "whole" and "groan" evolves into the diphthong of "round" and the higher sounds of "a red thing and a white thing." The recurrence of particular words (sight, trimming, red, white, thing) exemplifies Stein's theory of the relationship between "love" and repetition: that "if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more" (*LIA* 232). The sentence lightens into a kind of ecstasy of repetitive sound. There is no way to render such release in discursive terms. The multiple meanings work on a completely different plane from the eroticized experience of the words as sounds. Having become material "things," carrying not just symbolic but sensual content, Stein's words are fetishes, even as the reader — forced to see doubly, through the lenses of the mind's meaning and the body's knowing — must become a fetishist to read *Tender Buttons*.

In this important respect, Stein's fetishization refuses to choose between sense and sensuality. In "A Waist," for example, she suggests the motif of sewing, as in other sections of "Objects," yet she also creates of language not a container for meaning but an emphatic physical presence:

> A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness.
>
> Object that is in wood. Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the rush, make the bottom.
>
> A piece of crystal. A change, in a change that is remarkable there is no reason to say that there was a time.
>
> A woolen object gilded. A country climb is the best disgrace, a couple of practices any of them in order is so left. (*TB* 471–72)

"A Waist" evokes feminine dress. But the disjunction between the heading and the content (which, except for the word "woolen," evokes the natural world) forces the reader to examine individual words to decode the symbolic workings. The word "disgrace," for example, will recur in "A Petticoat," in a parodic version of lesbian transgression. And a "star," "crystal," and "gilded" may be drawn from Stein's lexicon of that which "shines" — a code word for sexual pleasure in *Tender Buttons*. "Grass" suggests the envy of "greediness," and the green of money, conflating nature and the fiduciary, the natural object and symbol. Categories are dismantled, as in the heading, where the pun on "waste" questions distinctions between physicality and social coverings (the waist of a dress). There is also a different kind of meaning in the heightening of tone ("Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the rush"), which impels the writing toward emotional climax, only to end in bathos: "make the bottom."

And yet we need to curb our irritable reaching after fact and reason. Any efforts at "encoding" are complicated, if not foiled, by moments that refuse grammatical rules. "A couple of practices any of them in order is so left" could be pinned down only with punctuation — a confusion similar to "object that is in wood" (a location, a material?). With such syntactic indeterminacy, no single meaning will yield itself. Instead, there are sonic repetitions: "a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness" uses sounds hypnotically (the liquid "l," for example), independent of semantic content. And, though this is no ecstasy of the mellifluous, even discursive statements (like the much-cited "Act so that there is no use in a centre" [*TB* 498]) provide only momentary resting points. It is tempting, for example, to read the following autobiographically: "in a change that is remarkable there is no reason to say that there was a time" (during a favorable change in one's life, there is no reason for nostalgia). Perhaps this is a cryptic allusion to the change of ménage when Alice moved in to 27, rue du Fleurus, and Leo eventually moved out. But such a reading, while possible, seems hopelessly reductive if asserted as a kind of translation — especially juxtaposed as the passage is with the more surreal "A woolen object gilded." Stein's breach of our expectations makes her play apparent: The

pleasure of this text is in the continuous doubling of words as names or symbols, and as material things.

It is this ability to see and to write both ways that makes *Tender Buttons* so disruptive a text. Stein disassembles existing systems of language, yet she does so without sacrificing the pleasures and functionality of the symbolic.[26] Stein's practice offers not only a joyful multiplicity but also a model for the feminist avant-garde text. Embracing language as thing and symbol at the same time, with a sense of both the signifying function of language and the disruptive release of prelinguistic pleasure, *Tender Buttons* shows us a poetics of fetishism, an eroticized, liberated objective world. For this reason — the subversive nature of the word in *Tender Buttons* — a description of Stein's poetics must take into account the other register of doubleness in her text: the parody that similarly claims an altered fetishism for a feminist avant-garde poetics.

From all available evidence, Stein was cognizant of Freudian theory by the time she wrote *Tender Buttons*, and in this respect there is support for her parody of the sexual difference on which Freudian theory (along with the sexologists' models) depended. In addition to Stein's extensive connection to William James and his lectures on psychology at Harvard, Lisa Ruddick has documented Stein's familiarity with Freud well before the writing of *Tender Buttons* (which Ruddick dates between 1910 and 1912) — as early as the time Stein was at work on *The Making of Americans*, between 1906 and 1908. Around 1909, when her brother Leo became absorbed in the theory of the unconscious, the terms "conscious" and "not-conscious" appear in Stein's chapter on love in *The Making of Americans*, which, according to Ruddick, associates the unconscious with sexuality and the infantile — a prominent and controversial feature of Freud's thinking (Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U. P., 1990], 93). A shift away from Jamesian psychology and toward Freud is evidenced, in part, through Stein's embrace of the notion of repetition, linked to that of the unconscious. Ruddick quotes a notebook entry in which Stein declares both that she is "not a pragmatist" and that "I believe in repetition." The notion of repetition suggests Freud's view of the functioning of the mind (96) and is further apparent in *Lectures in America*, where Stein writes about the repetition of the name of "anybody one loves."[27]

Passages of *Tender Buttons* provide evidence that Stein was engaging with the Freudian narrative of male fetishism, along with a variant of it — a version of object love that is multiple and playful, rather than fixated on the singularity of the (one) "thing." What many critics see as the submerged erotic plot of *Tender Buttons*[28] involves a parody and lesbian revision of the male fetishist's sexual pleasure in his personal objective world. In her playfully erotic and multiply-punning treatments of objects, Stein retells the Freudian story with a difference — that of the lesbian sexuality necessarily absent from Freud's theory of the fetishist.[29] In this sense, Stein contests not just Futurist rhetoric but also the emerging cultural discourse of the talking cure — itself oppositional — whose radicalism Stein implies is marred by lacunae.

Freud's essay "Fetishism," in which he describes the fetish as "a substitute for the [mother's] penis" (152) was not published until 1927, but versions of the theory appear as early as 1905, in "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood."[30] The Freudian narrative runs as follows: Fetishism, strictly a male perversion, begins with the boy's devastating loss of belief in the mother's phallic power and his attendant anxiety about his own possible castration. For some boys, this trauma is so profound that a deliberate self-deception ensues. The fetishist forges a strategy: He substitutes an object for the mother's missing penis. The defining feature of Freudian fetishism is thus its gender specificity. According to Freud, the fetishist, who cannot accept the mother's castration, chooses an object in which to see *both* the maternal phallus and, implicitly, its absence from the mother, evident in his substitution of this object (a shoe, for example) for the missing phallus: "the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and . . . does not want to give up." He empowers the fetish object with symbolic significance, so that its presence allows him to retain his belief in the phallic mother even as he acknowledges her lack. Freud calls this maneuver "a very ingenious solution of the difficulty" of confronting reality and still minimizing castration fear. Girls, on the other hand, share the mother's anatomy, and as a result they would derive no benefit from disavowing her castration. Hence the impossibility of female fetishism.[31]

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein projects desire onto diverse objects, rather than choosing a single substitute, as in Freud's male model, or glorifying the nonsentient world as masculine fetish object, as in Marinetti's and Pound's "seminal" poetics. The subject in Stein's scenario experiences the sensuality of the objective world without the threat of castration, the need to invest the fetish with purely symbolic potency, or the association of matter with force. In articulating her own form of object love, Stein also stages a parody

of her masculine counterparts — particularly the gender specificity of Freud's model. Whether in Luce Irigaray's concept of mimicry or Judith Butler's interest in gender confusion, parody in various forms has offered avant-garde women writers a way to show how women can benefit from asserting a different kind of power by subverting an overbearing original. Butler, in fact, links parodic gender practices ("subversive bodily acts") directly to an effective politics.[32] In this context — the potential parody offers to feminist politics (and its links to avant-garde practice)[33] — I am making a strong claim for Stein's lesbian fetishism: In *Tender Buttons*, Stein both asserts the difference of lesbian sexuality through a redeemed and revised fetishism and, at the same time, parodies the *male* versions of that same object love. Both highly serious and highly irreverent, Stein's text suggests the ways in which feminist avant-garde texts exploit parody and appropriate existing cultural norms to attack the mechanisms of gender difference.

Overturning the Freudian scenario, parody in *Tender Buttons* turns the rules of gender typing inside out. Like Joan Riviere's and Luce Irigaray's notions of masquerade and mimicry, Stein's parody is based on a strategic *performance* that suggests the material conditions that necessitate certain strategies.[34] Yet if Stein's parody in *Tender Buttons* attacks masculine views of the feminine (as does Irigaray's notion of the speculum and Wittig's creation of Amazon fantasies),[35] a crucial difference is that in her relationship with another woman, Stein refuses to be the object of masculine desire. In affirming lesbian sexuality, Stein is free to express a nonphallic desire that can only be mimed in heterosexuality. Attacking the Freudian economy, through which women are claimed for a masculine norm, Stein asserts the experience of lesbian pleasure through parodic revision.

Tender Buttons as a whole is clearly parodic — and not only where Freud is concerned. In Elizabeth Fifer's view, Stein both encodes sexuality and offers us moments of parody, including send-ups of romantic love itself (Fifer, "Is Flesh Advisable?" 477–79). Throughout *Tender Buttons*, Stein also takes shots at the Victorian earnestness that dictates strict sexual roles. In "Objects," for example, "A Time to Eat" can be read as a parody of Victorian domestic ritual in which the voice of the patriarch betrays its reliance on strict order: "A pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised and educated and resumed and articulate separation. This is not tardy" (*TB* 472). The whole notion of creating a time to eat suggests a need to control the raw energy of the appetite; in appointing a time for the consumption of food, the patriarch places limits on the satisfaction of desire. The notion of control over the body is reinforced by the tyranny of Latinate adjectives here. (Stein condemned the adjective as "not really and truly interesting" [*LIA* 211]). "Pleasant" and "simple" suggest the psychological need for decorum; like Edith Wharton's Mrs. Welland, whose life strategy was to avoid anything unpleasant, the paternal figure institutes a ritual of decorum, "resumed and articulate," to protect himself and those he is responsible for. In defense of the importance of honoring this time to eat, the patriarch chides the members of the family that "This is not tardy," that the law is to be respected and that, at the same time, the ritual itself is not tardy — outmoded. And yet, amid what is authorised appears the protest, the renaming of the father as tyrannical and the notion of time as articulate, in opposition to a more organic sense of the body and time as Bergsonian (or Jamesian) duration. The humor of "A Time to Eat" lies in its combination of parody with quick shifts in voice that alter the tone even from one word to the next.

Yet this parodic word-play is most cutting in the crucial passages where Stein contrasts masculinist views of sexuality with a lesbian alternative. The erotic encodings in *Tender Buttons*, as I have noted, have been explored extensively, but Stein's parody in these same passages has often been overlooked. *Tender Buttons* metonymically substitutes eroticized objects for the female body and yet also impersonates the masculine perspective on both lesbian and heterosexual sexuality. The fetishistic functioning of language in *Tender Buttons* in this way provides the means of achieving this kind of double-seeing.

One of the densest examples of Stein's parody of masculinist attitudes is the close of the "Objects" section. "This Is This Dress, Aider" signifies on multiple levels, parodying a masculine view of heterosexual intercourse, as well as representing lesbian sex and one kind of masculine response to its supposed perversion. It demonstrates Stein's use of puns and linguistic play to parody one thing and pay tribute to another:

> THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER
>
> Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.
>
> A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.
>
> (*TB* 476)

William Gass astutely points out the contrast between male and female sexuality that emerges in the space between the first sentence and the second.[36] What Gass and others have noticed fits the model of Stein's textual fetishism, for the multiply signifying — punning — heading sets up

an even broader range of meanings. "This Dress" is often read as "distress," and "Aider" as both a pun on Alice (Ada was one of Stein's names for Alice Toklas, evident in "Susie Asado," among other works), and an elision of "aid her." Thus the possibility of both distress and pleasure emerge right away, coupled inextricably in the same signifiers. "This Is This Dress" also picks up on the domestic motif of sewing for a final time in "Objects" and implies a play with identity and difference (this is this), central to all sexuality.

Given the confusion between calling for "aid" and receiving pleasure from "Aider" (evoked in the ecstatic sounds of "why whow, whow stop touch"), Gass, despite his cogent reading of the movement from female orgasmic pleasure to more violent (male) sexuality ("A jack in kill her"), misses the double perspective Stein creates. The second sentence, as Ruddick points out, critiques the male sex act in which a "jack," who, through patriarchal law becomes a "meadowed king," "makes a to let" — a toilet or a rented or used vessel — out of the female body. The second sentence seems less polyvalent than the first; clearly the meadowed king is crowned at the expense of the female, "her."[37] In this sense, Stein satirizes the meadowed king.

Yet the same kind of parody occurs from the very beginning of "This Is This Dress." The play between lesbian sexuality and "distress" clearly calls up the patriarchal law; since "Aider" is the source of pleasure, distress would be felt only by the *male* onlooker — who, fetishistically, watches and labels what he sees with a symbolic value, one he associates with a threat. The lesbian experience of pleasure — which need not involve the phallus at all — causes distress to the "king," who, as patriarch, longs to aid the female gone astray. He displaces his phallic anxiety (for the two women represent the insignificance of his own sexuality) onto chivalric concern for a woman in distress. There is a fetishistic substitution of castration fear with paternalistic regard that Stein brilliantly parodies through punning — sheer signification.

Meanwhile, however, the text registers on the other level as well — that of pleasure. "Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch" presents several possible decodings. "Aider" is the lover's name (and "saying that name any number of times" makes one "love it more" [*LIA* 232]), but it is also a question: "Aid her?" The response is, in fact, "*why* aid her?" That is, the lovers don't need the intervention so anxiously posited by the patriarchal onlooker. As the sentence unfolds, the masculine perspective drops out, giving way to pleasure ("whow stop touch"), and ending with a humorous

version of mutual satisfaction (a single "muncher" — suggesting oral gratification — becoming plural, "munchers"). The final reflection that occurs in the second sentence interprets the masculine response to the lesbian exclusion of the phallus and ends the "Objects" section with what is at once a satire of masculine panic and, at the same time, a representation of an orgasmic lesbian experience. Stein's invention of a fetishistic language — at once satiric and shot through with erotic pleasure — thus aids her in creating a parody of the very fetishism she appropriates and renews in a radical poetics that contests the "normal" in sexuality and language alike.

Elaborate encodings of sexual experience occur throughout "Objects" and continue in "Food" and "Rooms."[38] Yet the first part of *Tender Buttons* exemplifies most clearly Stein's parodic versions of Freudian fetishism that, at the same time, seek to represent sexuality. Stein begins with the material world. Stein's process of composition involved a consciously fetishistic relationship to the objects she chose to paint in prose.[39] Her strategy was to focus on an object and through this visual relationship liberate herself to name it without using its already-given name. Three times in "Portraits and Repetition" Stein describes the importance of such looking in *Tender Buttons*: "I was trying to live in looking, and looking was not to mix itself up with remembering" (*LIA* 189); and later, "I did express what something was, a little by talking and listening to that thing, but a great deal by looking at that thing" (*LIA* 190). She even goes so far as to explain the substitution of objects for living subjects: "I had the feeling that something should be included and that something was looking, and so concentrating on looking I did the Tender Buttons because it was easier to do objects than people if you were just looking" (*LIA* 198–99). According to Freud, the child "begins to display an intense desire to look, as an erotic instinctual activity" even before he discovers the mother's castration, and the awareness of castration is based on his visual encounter with the female body. Stein deliberately repeats the fetishist's scopophilia (love of looking) that invests the object with erotic significance and then focuses on it to achieve orgasm, or, in Stein's appropriation, a pleasure of the text.[40]

This fetishistic process at once mimics male fetishism and substitutes a feminist version — a release into the sensuality of the material world and of language that asserts independence from masculine norms and controls, and from men as sexual partners. Within an economy of plenitude, the lesbian fetishist sees language as presence. She is liberated to experience the sensuality of the objective world without fearing castration.[41] In writing that refuses to link language and lack, Stein irreverently appropriates

Freud, parodying his theory of fetishism by toying with the notion of castration. From start to finish, many of the items featured in "Objects" are fetishistic favorites, metonymically associated with the female body: a box, an umbrella, a long dress, a hat, a purse, a petticoat, a handkerchief, shoes, a shawl.

The most clearly parodic of these sections is simple enough, and its very clarity is, in this case, a result of its reliance on a predominantly symbolic use of language. Here signification supplies the tools for parody:

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

In Freudian terms, a petticoat would be a perfect candidate for a fetish, since it is likely to be the last object glimpsed before the boy discovers his mother's castration; then, too, there is both a metaphoric and a metonymic logic to the choice of the petticoat, encircling as it does the female body, even bearing its traces, its shape. Stein plays on the likelihood of male fixation on feminine clothing, much as she does in "This Is This Dress, Aider" (and, clearly, the petticoat is part of the study of dress in *Tender Buttons*) through the word "disgrace," akin to the pun in "distress" in the later section. Ruddick points out the specifically female nature of this "rosy charm," for the "disgrace" that taints the "light white" of the undergarment is, on one level, menstrual blood.[42] Thus the fetishistic narrative functions doubly. In Stein's rendering of the male fetishist's perspective, for a moment the fetish is ruined — stained by the female genitals that the fetishist finds loathsome. At the same time, Stein substitutes a feminist narrative, one that rejoices in the erotics of disgrace, of a mistake that becomes charming because it represents a transgression of the virginal white of the petticoat. For Stein, the petticoat does, in fact, take on an erotic charge; just like the "Red Hat" (*TB* 467) that becomes eroticized through the fact of its color, this tainted garment is a source of joy to the lover who identifies its familiar color. The male, on the other hand, sees blood as other, perhaps even a sign of the castration he has sought to forget through the process of fetishizing a newly beloved object. In the paratactic list of "A Petticoat," Stein at once creates a male fetishist's nightmare and a lesbian fetishist's revision: Taking pleasure in the rosy charm, this alternative economy recovers (or avoids in the first place) the loathing of the female body that obsesses the male fetishist.

At once parodic and erotic, using both semantics and suggestion, "A Petticoat" represents the female laugh in *Tender Buttons*, what Cixous would later see as a version of the Medusa, an image she appropriates to recast male castration fear. For Cixous, castration should elicit only women's laughter: "Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one" (255). Just as Cixous takes Freud's interpretation of the Medusa as a figure for male castration fear (the head enveloped by phallic snakes) and invests the image with beauty, Stein invests the rosy trace with the appeal of a charm. And laughter — at once joyous and vengeful — is part of Stein's strategy. In the case of "A Petticoat," Stein's laughter mocks and celebrates at once, cutting both ways. We could well apply Freud himself, on the function of humor: "Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself" (Freud, "Humour" 163). Stein's strategy bears out Freud's insights, "asserting itself" against masculine anxiety and domination, and, by so doing, Stein's becomes an example of feminist practice, fomenting both rebellion and a triumph of the ego.

Stein's alternative view of the material world emerges as well in other sections of "Objects" that contrast male fetishism and lesbian sexual experience. In "Shoes," as in "This Is This Dress," Stein uses the relatively simple structure of two sections to create a marked contrast:

> SHOES
>
> To be a wall with a damper a stream of pounding way and nearly enough choice makes a steady midnight. It is pus.
>
> A shallow hole rose on red, a shallow hole in and in this makes ale less. It shows shine. (*TB* 474)

The object is common to male fetishists because of the boy's (supposed) act of glancing up the mother's skirt only to discover her lack and substituting, for the phallus, her shoes. Stein contrasts male and female anatomy, reversing the polarity by displaying a disgust for the former and celebrating the latter. The first section contains the phallic images of "a stream of pounding," and its residue of seminal "pus." There is a resistance to motion, a stifling of the body (a version of the patriarch's control of the appetite in "A Time to Eat"). A "wall with a damper" suggests the hindering of fluid movement, while violent "pounding" leads only to "a steady midnight," a (spiritual) obscurity. The shoes, as fetishes, represent fixation — the lack of choice characteristic of the male fetishist. Whatever pleasure might be taking place in the closet, its climax is deflated.

By contrast, brightness and multiple punning erupt in the second section

as Stein substitutes pleasure for the male fetishist's unappealing relationship to the shoes. Crucial to the reversal of the male fetishist's mechanism is a bilingual pun. Ruddick points out that the French "chose" is slang for "vagina" ("Rosy Charm" 227), punning on both "shoes" and "shows." The change of perspective, then, takes place on the level of the signifier itself: The same object, and the same word, are perceived from different points of view. "A shallow hole rose on red" serves as an alternative depiction of the "chose," one that rejects the male fear of the female genitals. The sensory and symbolic qualities of "red" and "rose" — associated with the female body — are played with rather than feared, while assonance and alliteration return the language to its materiality. The repetitions Stein delights in ("a shallow hole," "in and in") link the love of words to a delight in the "rose" of the female body. And, of course, the code for Alice ("ale less") evokes Stein's difference from the male paradigm. In this movement from fear to pleasure, "midnight" becomes "shine" — a term which, along with other words for brightness in *Tender Buttons*, signifies sexual satisfaction. Rejecting the male's fixation on the object in the closet, Stein brings the shoes into the light; even as she retains a private textual code, Stein takes a specifically lesbian pleasure in the heterogeneity of the material world, the body, and the word.

The same eroticization of language and objects appears in "A Little Called Pauline," one of the few headings that is as disjunctive as the text itself. The act of naming ("calling") with affection (the diminutive "little") results in a new name — Pauline, the feminized version of the masculine (perhaps apostolic) Paul. Stein evokes several different objects in the game of naming what one desires; the plurality (rather than the fetishist's singular choice) suggests a polymorphously perverse pleasure. The sexual image with which the section opens ("A little called anything shows shudders" [473]) can be glossed by Stein's comments on the noun, conflating language, love, and object in Stein's poetic world. Since poetry is "really loving the name of anything" (*LIA* 232), naming an object (a little called anything) is an act of love — it "shows shudders." Throughout this section, Stein refuses to choose *one* object. Rejecting patriarchal symbols ("There is no pope"), Stein also escapes the obsessive singularity of the male fetishist, as in this punning reprise of "Shoes": "little dressing and choose wide soles and little spats really little spices." From "soles" and masculine "spats" come "little spices," elements of a rather feminine oral pleasure that refuses to be singular. Instead, Stein evokes male fetishism ("A little lace") and its possible punishment (it "makes boils") only to shed such fear ("This is not true") in favor of "her": "A peaceful life to arise her, noon and moon and moon." Perhaps the most explicit sexual "rise" is "I hope she has her cow." Fifer has noted that "cow" denotes orgasm in Stein's lexicon, here associated with "Bidding a wedding" and thus with Stein's own romantic sublime (480–81). The unnamed "she" places "A Little Called Pauline" in a realm of concern for — rather than objectification of — a loved woman,[43] suggesting a version of fetishism based on adoration, not loathing, of the body.

Such an embrace is suggested by "A Shawl" whose comfortable intimacy counters the Freudian fetishist's fixation: "A shawl is a hat and hurt and a red balloon and an under coat and a sizer a sizer of talks" (*TB* 475). The hat has already emerged in Stein's erotic lexicon, especially in being red, while "hurt" is itself a metonym for shades of red (in "A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass," it suggests wine). A "red balloon" becomes an eroticized shape. Most significantly, "A sizer" reads as "a scissor," a feminine aid to sewing that can be both a threatening instrument to the male fearful of castration and, conversely, a potent tool for the fetishist who cuts women's hair. Yet the reflexive language here bears further examination, as in the following: "It was a mistake to state that a laugh and a lip and a laid climb and a depot and a cultivator and little choosing is a point it." The "mistake," like the fortuitous "disgrace" in "A Petticoat," is a matter of language ("a mistake to state"). It is a mistake to state that this list "is a point it," that is, "disappointed," or, possibly, has a point or logical closure, as in traditional syntax. "Point" suggests a directive; Stein returns to the questions with which "Objects" began — the carafe, an object that is "an arrangement in a system to pointing" (*TB* 462). Meditating on her relationship to the covering of language, Stein refuses to rely simply on making a point; at the same time, she is not disappointed with the nouns she "addresses and caresses." Instead, Stein takes joy in the material that is language.

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein combines object love with her own encoded sexuality, rejecting both the hard realities of the technological sublime and the primacy of the masculine in Freudian discourse. Her object love claims Freud's version of the fetishist's intriguing oscillation for a joyful multiplicity rather than the perception of absence. Rejecting Freudian difference, Stein assumes a nonphallic view of the objective world and of language.

The Freudian fetishism whose narrative Stein explored relies on what Freud called "genital deficiency" — the notion that women's bodies lack what is apparent in the male anatomy.[44] We might argue that, like Sarah

Kofman and other recent feminist theorists, Stein explores what Naomi Schor calls a "paradigm of undecidability" in her play with fetishism, "a *strategy* designed to turn the so-called 'riddle of femininity' to women's account." Any such subversive revision of psychoanalysis might serve as a means to assert a necessary ambivalence toward Freud — to salvage aspects of his theory for feminist ends.[45] In this respect Stein counters the heterosexual and masculinist elements of Freudian theory. Still, Stein does not express a singular version of "the feminine." Rather, she refutes contemporaneous theories of women's sexuality, encoding a taboo lesbian desire into the most common, seemingly innocuous words. *Tender Buttons* sets the stage for experiments like Monique Wittig's *Lesbian Body*, which attacks dominant conceptions of lesbian desire (and identity) by deconstructing syntactic norms. Wittig asserts the existence of an Amazonian lesbian culture. Since the lesbian is "illusionary for traditional male culture," this lived reality includes no distinctions among "fictional, symbolic, [and] actual." For Wittig, as for Stein, "The body of the text subsumes all the words of the female body," achieving "affirmation of its reality," so that "To recite one's own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up" (Wittig, *Lesbian Body* 9–10). Wittig wrests the lesbian body from heterosexual linguistic control: Because the "generic feminine subject can *only* enter by force into a language which is foreign to it," Wittig invents a pronoun, employing a visual sign for the split lesbian subject — "j/e." As in Stein's model, Wittig not only rejects dominant narratives of female sexuality but also literally creates an alternative feminist language.

In its radical signs, *Tender Buttons* attests to Stein's belief in the intersections among the objective world, language, and sexuality, in contrast to the fascination with the power of the inanimate, and the ambivalence about the human body, that spurred the writing of so many male avant-garde writers of her day. Stein's "revolution" insisted on the intimacy of domestic life and the preeminently private experience of an encoded language. Yet Stein's experiments differ as well from those of other feminist avant-garde writers working during the years of the historical avant-gardes. Stein's cryptic encodings cannot be likened in formal terms to Mina Loy's feminist satires, yet Stein and Loy share the ambition of distinguishing their experiments from the work of the vocal avant-garde groups of their day. Like Stein, Loy was in dialogue with Futurist rhetoric. And like Stein, she voiced dramatic divergences from Marinetti's aesthetics and politics. Hers is an even more pointedly satiric poetics that announced an idiosyncratic feminist avant-garde agenda of its own.