1999 Atlantic Association of Undergraduate English Conference Essay Winner

Circle Games: Inscriptions of the Child Self in Gertrude Stein's *The World Is Round*

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ABSTRACT

Atlantis is proud to publish the winning essay on the topic "Women Writers" from a competition held at the 19th Annual Conference, Mount Saint Vincent University, February, 1999.

RÉSUMÉ

Atlantis est fier de publier l'article sur le sujet "Women Writers" (les écrivaines) qui a remporté le prix du concours d'écriture tenu lors de la 19ème conférence annuelle, à l'Université Mount Saint Vincent, en février 1999.

Writing about Gertrude Stein writing about writing the self into creation is akin to leaping onto a moving carousel. How does one know the best spot to grab hold when there is no one place of beginning, but many? I am sure Stein would be very amused were she able to see my quandary. The circularity of *The World is Round* is precisely what Stein seeks to illuminate in terms of the relation of self-construction to language. Stein's project of de-stabilizing terms of identity reinforces the postmodern project of simultaneously resisting the fixity of self while inscribing a variety of possible evolutions of selfhood. In terms of a queer feminist reading of the text, Stein encourages a dissonance that encourages a disruption of conventional identity categories.

Childhood is the point at which Rose, Stein's central character in *The World is Round*, seeks to understand where she might be situated within a world that spins incessantly outside of her control. Rose's terror of such circular infinity is exemplified when she begins to cry while singing of her lack of a specific identity (Stein 2). As Rose, and her dog Love, cry until they are unable to cry any longer, Stein tells us that "all this time the world just continued to be round" (Stein 2). Rose's own insignificance disconcerts her as she realizes that her desire to assert control over her social location is not reflected in a world that continues to revolve oblivious to her presence. The child's grappling with the concept of separateness within an interconnected social structure is the place at which Rose begins her search for meaning and identity.

Stein defines identity in terms of the relation of self to others - for example, she refers to Rose's reflection of self through her dog, Love: "I am I because my little dog knows me" (Schwenger 118). She introduces Rose's cousin Willie, against whom Rose can compare herself, since we are told that he is not like Rose. Whereas Rose questions whether she would continue to be herself were she to possess another name, Willie is confident that even if his name were Henry he "would be Willie always Willie all the same" (Stein 3). These two figures suggest that infinity is simultaneously

disconcerting and comforting within the symbolic understanding of self. As in the Lacanian number theory of self-identification where the number two, consisting of two individual ones, reflects back on itself, Willie reflects Rose back on herself, allowing for the unified whole that enables individual identity (Schwenger 120). At the end of the story Willie illuminates Rose with a searchlight, allowing her to see herself as a separate, functioning being. Rose thus becomes individuated even while she is dependent on another outside herself for a sense of her own separate existence.

Stein's grammatical repetitions function to mimic children's use of language as well as to situate Rose within her own narrative (Schwenger 121). The performative utterance of her inscription of "Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose" (Stein 16) signals a moment when Rose understands herself as a separate entity/identity. This awareness is the result of Rose's struggle to carve her inscription around the trunk of the tree, witnessed by periodic pauses to sharpen her knife on a stone when it becomes too dull to cut any longer. While Stein understands that the separateness of self is disconcerting for Rose (and us), the child-like litany of "Rose is a Rose" is reflective of how repetition operates to inscribe our sense of being in the world (Schwenger 121).

Locating the self in language is a difficult task for Rose who seeks to escape the circularity of fluid identities that have no fixed character (Rust 132). Rose attempts to control this dizzying circle by inserting linearity through the use of lists. Even here, however, Stein subverts the lists themselves, by having them become part of the circle, curling back on themselves in much the same way that the ouroboros, or tail-swallowing serpent, comes back on itself (Rust 135). When Rose's dog Love chases a rabbit, Stein disrupts the image with a list of the people and things to which Love likes to say hello (Stein 4). Rather than achieving the linear order Rose desires, the flow and rhythm of the lists brings us back to new beginnings again and again (Rust 137). Subsequently Rose continues to seek other methods of escaping the circularity of meaning.

Rose chooses to ascend a mountain in order to escape the circle in which she can find no sense of self, assuming that by making this linear journey from point A to point B she can direct her own path by asserting a purposeful non-circular mapping. In modern parlance, Rose climbs the mountain "to find herself." Her search, however, is thwarted when Stein alters the site of Rose's landscape. Rose's sense of control begins to erode when she realizes that her decision to scale the mountain which she took to be blue (her favourite colour) is actually green. Stein forces Rose to see the futility of creating linearity where it does not, and cannot, exist by reminding us during Rose's ascent that "the world is round no matter how it does sound" (Stein 11).

Given that Rose's decision to scale the mountain in her search for self is predicated on her belief that the mountain is blue, one must ask how Rose can assume or seek an identity based on faulty information. How has Rose come to believe that a green mountain is blue? Has she shaped her desire in such a way as to distort her image of her world; has she been viewing the world through (pardon the pun) rose-coloured glasses? Perhaps if Rose had been in command of accurate information she would have chosen to journey by boat across the blue lake, which was earlier the site of Willie's near drowning, bisecting its circularity - in which case she may have been drowned in the round lake, her identity consumed and subsumed in eternal circularity.

In her search for a stable self, Rose believes that she must go "there," since she already knows that she has no stable self "here." She travels up the mountain in the belief that she will find a fixed self there. The problem, of course, with "there" is that once you have arrived you are now "here." The impossibility of ever situating oneself "there" perpetuates the infinite circularity that so disconcerts Rose.

The use of language in which single words or phrases are understood to contain multiple, and often contradictory, meanings has been investigated at length by queer theorist Lee Edelman in his work *Homographesis: Essays on Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994). The homographic moment in which one thing is confused with another - as blue and green have been in Stein's narrative - is

also reflected in Rose's name, which can signify the flower, the colour, or the action of moving upward. Stein's use of homographesis implies multiple readings that point "in opposite directions" (Edelman 10). When Rose carves "Rose is a Rose" around the tree, the reader is confronted with the proposition that Rose simultaneously occupies a position as both subject and object since each capitalized Rose can refer to a person or a flower depending upon the point of beginning. Given that the carving is done around the tree trunk, it is impossible for anyone but Rose herself to know where the beginning and ending are situated. The multiplicity of meanings inherent in the sentence denies the reader an absolute, single meaning of the words, and points to the impossibility of a single fixed identity for Rose.

Further, the linguistic interchange between name and function is articulated throughout the narrative. We are told that both Rose's name and her mood are blue when she sings "I am Rose but I am not rosy" (Stein 19). As well, during Rose's ascent of the mountain she takes with her a blue chair that functions dually as a cane. These dualities of meaning and function reinforce the theme of multiple interpretations, and lead the reader to question which commands the greater privilege, name or usage. Stein points the reader toward the dual nature of identity, as both nominal and functional. Stein's use of language questions whether Rose can be a little girl and a flower simultaneously.

Stein's playful use of words also serves a dual purpose. As well as representing the circular, absurd moment, it mimics children's command of language in its dependence upon the physical pleasures created by sound and tactility. Young children learning to speak repeat and practice words, often delighting in nonsensical rhymes and multi-syllabic words that feel interesting or funny on the lips and tongue. This physical pleasure of speech and the construction of identity become linked in Stein's writing, thus bringing together the symbolic and imaginary realms of communication. Children's linguistic play functions here to deconstruct the rigidity of normative identity categories through pleasure. Language that creates multiple, and often opposing meanings de-stabilizes the words, allowing for fluid meanings and flexible identities.

Given that the act of producing certain sounds creates physical pleasure for the speaker, the fixity of sites of erotic pleasure is called into question, as when Rose's dog Love expresses the desire for asparagus, and shortly thereafter learns to bark (Stein 8). In this passage Stein connects the physical pleasures of eating, speech, and desire. Stein's work suggests the possibility that identity and desire are not only linked, but are also not fixed by the language in which they reside.

These continuous fluctuations in the narrative constitute a queering of the text. Stein suggests one thing within the narrative, only to displace it moments later with a seemingly opposing idea. This constant instability requires the reader to consider, and reconsider, ideas previously assumed to be immutable. For Rose, a blue mountain becomes green, a chair functions as a cane, and a trip up the mountain does not answer questions - such as where is "there" - but suggests other ones. Identities do not remain stable, which is the source of Rose's anxiety, and Willie's pleasure.

Even The End does not function conventionally in Stein's narrative, but rather signals the beginning of a new chronicle in which Rose marries Willie, who turns out not to be her cousin, "just how nobody knows," and they begin to raise a family of their own (Stein 20). While the new narrative contains the same characters present in *The World is Round*, they are starting from a different perspective, a new psychic location. Rose now knows that blue mountains are sometimes really green, and while the world continues to be round and unstoppable, her engagement with it has changed. As Elspeth Probyn points out, "no one orders us to start again from where we began the time before" (Probyn 121).

Rather than valourizing childhood as a time when meaning and identity are fixed and stable, Stein demonstrates the simultaneous comfort and anxiety associated with multiple choices. While Stein reflects childhood as a period of intense longing for a sense of self made evident when Rose sings, "Why am I a little girl/Where am

I a little girl/When am I a little girl/Which little girl am I" (Stein 2), she also resists the nostalgic notion of a childhood innocence which could restore us to happiness if only we could get back there, since "there" becomes "here," and therefore impossible (Stein 19). Rose and Willie are two sides of the same coin, invested with both happiness and sadness at the same time; singing makes Rose cry, but excites Willie (Stein 20). Stein refuses the investment in the child that has, since Freud's pathologizing of childhood, carried the weight of our failures, and the guilt of our mothers. This nostalgic desire only serves to legitimize our sense of regret for a past that is never quite what is remembered. The realization that the world, and the words, are round and continuously moving is at once terrifyingly immense and full of the possibility of multiple expressions of self.

Stein provides a linguistic space in which the fear of the unstable self can be a productive vehicle for transformation, and the possibility of other selves can be realized. This creative space of imagined selves is where gay and lesbian identities can resist nostalgia and embrace other readings. For the queer feminist project of revisiting language, Gertrude Stein provides a place in childhood from which to begin, and begin again, more cognizant of the positive applications of a round world in which we can construct, de-construct, and re-construct new identities unencumbered by the linearity that ascribes and inscribes fixed identities. This moment of de-scribing invites a linguistic freedom in which the child can recognize the linkages between desire and identity, unbounded by social prescriptives. Stein encourages a reading in which the child can return again and again to the carousel, each time with new knowledge that adds fresh perspective, in a world that just keeps on being round.

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