

Towards a Redefinition of the Theatrical Avant-Garde in the United States

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Resumen: Las últimas décadas del siglo veinte han dado testimonio de la publicación de nuevos estudios que se centran en el desarrollo de la vanguardia teatral en Estados Unidos. En ellos existe un acuerdo en proponer la década de 1950 como el punto de partida para el desarrollo de una vanguardia teatral en Estados Unidos debido a la creación de grupos como “The Living Theatre”, “The Open Theatre” o “The Mabou Mines”. En este sentido, la identificación del comienzo de una tradición vanguardista teatral en la segunda mitad del siglo veinte y, por lo tanto, medio siglo después de que lo hiciera la vanguardia artística europea, es una premisa firmemente establecida en la crítica literaria. El presente artículo, sin embargo, propone reconsiderar las fechas del inicio de una vanguardia teatral estadounidense mediante el análisis de la contribución teatral de Gertrude Stein, cuya escritura teatral se desarrolló en el contexto de la vanguardia europea y significó una clara inspiración para la generación de grupos de teatro experimental de la década de los 50.

Palabras clave: Teatro estadounidense, Vanguardia teatral, Teatro experimental, Gertrude Stein.

Abstract: The last decades of the twentieth century have witnessed an upsurge of new works that focus on the development of the theatrical avant-garde in the United States. Among these studies there is wide agreement in locating the in the 1950s the development of a theatrical avant-garde in the United States with groups such as “The Living Theatre”, “The Open Theatre” or “The Mabou Mines”. Thus, the identification of the beginning of an avant-gardist tradition in the second half of the twentieth century and, therefore, half a century later than the historical avant-garde in Europe seems to be firmly established in literary criticism. This article, however, wishes to reconsider the dates for the beginning of an American avant-garde by analyzing the theatrical contribution of playwright Gertrude Stein, whose playwriting developed in the context of the European avant-garde and became an inspiration for the later experimental generation of theatre practitioners in the 1950s.

Key words: U.S. Theater, Theatrical avant-garde, Experimental theater, Gertrude Stein.

The last decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a distinctive upsurge in the analysis of the theatrical avant-garde in the United States. Either to claim its demise at different decades in the late twentieth century, reassess the composition of its canon or analyze its relation with the European historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, the academic field has witnessed the proliferation of studies and anthologies -such as Harding’s *Contours Of The Theatrical Avant-Garde* (2000), Aronson’s *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (2000), Cardullo and Knopf’s

Theater Of The Avant-Garde: 1890-1950 (2001) or Savran's "The Death of The Avant-Garde" (2005)- that offer a comprehensive insight into the issues and debates that have characterized the discussion of this particular time period in the history of Western theatre.

Although the very concept of avant-garde is established upon a "fluidity in definition" (Harding 2000: 5) that has been used to denote a wide array of theatrical practices at different historical moments, the notion of theatrical avant-gardism in the United States is associated with certain theatrical practices that were born in the late 1950s and have been loosely joined together under the label "experimental". It was at this precise moment that groups such as the Black Mountain College, the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre or The Performance Group, formed what is agreed upon as being the **first** avant-gardist generation in the United States and David Savran has identified a "later wave of the avant-garde" in the work of Robert Wilson, Mabou Mines, Richard Foreman, and -what Savran deems the last representative of the avant-garde- the Wooster Group (2005: 11, 33). This later generation is characterized, according to Savran, by a subsiding political compromise and a dying sense of rebellion (2005: 33), which is "what distinguishes the authentic avant-garde from the experimental theater that passes as avant-garde today" (Harding 2000: 6). Thus, Savran argues that the term is nowadays applied to a certain kind of highbrow experimental theater that has totally left behind the political commitment of the early wave of avant-gardists and has led to a "*branding* of the avantgarde, the production of the label 'avantgarde' as a kind of registered trademark" (2005: 36).

The reasons for locating the first avant-gardist flare-up in the 1950s are varied. Savran, for instance, argues that the absence of government funding, the growth of the counterculture, as well as other social and political upheavals of the period led to the construction of an alternative, non-profit theatre that was politically oriented. These were the conditions that favoured the particular commitment of these groups. Thus, "most of the avantgarde theatres of the 1960s were as committed to social revolution as they were to an aesthetic one" (Savran 2005: 33). In this sense, the avant-garde played an especially important role in the post-war theatre, which led the way both in aesthetic and political terms (Savran 2005: 10), and emerged in connection with a bold spirit of experimentation that challenged and totally rejected the *status quo* posing an attack upon established practices of mainstream culture (Aronson 2000: 3). This theatre presented itself as non-commercial, rich in "cultural and symbolic capital" -i.e. antieconomic and antibourgeois (Bourdieu qtd. in Savran 2005: 10, 11).

The political agenda behind most post-war theatre was clearly embedded in a formal revolution that led, as Harding argues, to the "avant-garde's redefinition of the **mise-en-scène** and of performance as artistic forms in their own right" (2000:1). This fact may explain why avant-garde theatrical practice is deemed elitist by most critics, who see in it a series of "rarefied forms of performance available to limited

segments of the populace and whose understanding and appreciation required some degree of training or special knowledge” (Aronson 2000: xi). Such elitist character seems to have been echoed in academic criticism, a fact noted by critics such as Alan Woods, who, as Harding explains, “has suggested that the scholarly interest in the avant-garde is indicative of a ‘literary bias’ that privileges avant-garde performance over popular theatre, since ‘much popular theatre lacks the literary value (or even merit)’ that scholars have identified in avant-garde expressions” (Harding 2000: 4). Savran also subscribes to the elitist character of avant-gardism, which he merits to a “modernist cultural hierarchy that opposes art and commerce, esoteric and popular, live and mediated, progressive and reactionary, avantgarde and kitsch” (2005:35).

Thus, almost half a century later, U.S. theatre experienced a similar outburst of the artistic creativity that had characterized Europe at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Aronson puts it, “[in the post-war period] the concept of an avant-garde was something new in American theatre. The European theatre (and art, music, and literature) had experienced waves of avant-garde activity since the emergence of symbolism in the 1880s, but there was no equivalent in the United States” (2000: 2). It is my contention that, in line with other revisions of the canonical avant-garde along identity politics to include groups such as “El Teatro Campesino”, the usually acknowledged beginnings of theatrical avant-gardism in the 1950s may be revised if a playwright such as Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) is taken into account. Her theatrical thought and work opens up the possibility to laying claim to the existence of an early American avant-gardist playwright that showed several common traits with European avant-garde movements.

Stein’s playwriting spanned a period of thirty years, in which she wrote about a hundred of play ranging from highly experimental texts at the beginning to lesser ones in subsequent stages, including the 1934 Broadway season hit *Four Saints In Three Acts* or *Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights* (1938) and *The Mother of Us All* (1946). Stein was an inspiration for the 1950s artistic generation of theatre practitioners, who turned to Stein’s idiosyncratic aesthetic universe in their search for an experimental theatrical language that would challenge the mimetic representation of reality. Julian Beck, for instance, explicitly acknowledged Stein’s inspirational role in creating an alternative to the psychological realism that dominated the American stage: “it was like a manifesto and would always stand at the head of our work saying take the clue from this” (Qtd. in Bowers 1991: 130). In fact, the work of Stein seemed to have a natural likeness with the aesthetics of the 60s, which Marranca specifically identifies as sharing an interest on process and repetition, on the attachment to the devises of the ordinary, on the fascination with objects, an insistence on presence, and a devotion to all kinds of experiments with new formal vocabularies in all the arts (1995: XXIII). Given the pervasive affinities with some of the artistic principles of the theatrical and artistic avant-gardist movements, we argue that Stein should be located next to the contribution of artists

like Cage whose influence and whose contribution to the development of the American vanguard in the 1950s has been fully recognized and clearly established. The recognition of Stein's theatre and her contribution to the history of American theatre has been slow to reach the academic world. Usually considered a fiction writer rather than a playwright, she is often presented as precursor of the 1950s avant-garde rather than an example of an U.S. avant-gardist playwright herself. A welcomed exception are studies such as Cardullo and Knopf's *Theatre Of The Avant-Garde: 1890-1950* and Bay-Cheng's *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theatre*, which argue that Stein as the first avant-garde playwright in the United States (Bay-Cheng 2004: 2; Cardullo and Knopf 2001: 18). In particular, Cardullo and Knopf include her in their anthology as an example of "American Dada and Surrealism" -although Stein always denied any association with surrealism- whereas Bay-Cheng places Stein in dialogue with the cultural movements of the time and adds a multi-faceted perspective by arguing that the 1890s, the decade that saw the beginning of theatrical avant-gardism and cinema, also marked the emergence of a homosexual identity and therefore, these three phenomena are interrelated in Stein's playwrighting. It is in this sense that both studies present a significant contribution to the field of steinian analysis and the re-evaluation of the U.S. theatrical avant-garde by emphasizing Stein's connection with other contemporary artistic developments of the early twentieth century.

Stein's dramatic writing significantly develops in parallel to the sheer radical experimentation that took place in Europe at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries. Knapp, for instance, argues that the European theatrical tradition conforms a clear precedent for the development of Stein's theatre. Specifically, *King Ubu* (1896), Guillaume Apollinaire -with his *The Breasts of Tiresias* (1917)-, Jean Cocteau, Tristan Tzara, Roger Vitrac or Antonin Artaud's *Jet of Blood* (1925) possibly constitute the most obvious references in order to place Stein's theatre in the anti-representational and anti-traditional theatre of the beginnings of the XXth century (Knapp 1990: 136-37). Actually, the starting premise for Stein's writing -the will to "kill" the nineteenth century, as she famously expressed it- is also a fundamental starting point for artists such as Cézanne or Picasso as well as with the artistic agenda behind Modernism. As Berry has argued, "as was true of other modernist writers, Gertrude Stein's early narrative innovations developed from a quarrel with the philosophic and aesthetic assumptions of the nineteenth century, assumptions that find their fullest expression in the classic realist novel" (1992: 37). There are, however, significant divergences between Stein and other Modernist writers that can also be located in the common goal of leaving the realist tradition behind (Berry 1992:37),

in Stein's case, the motivations for the nature of this murderous desire differed in important ways from the revisionary impulses of male modernists. For her it was a matter of killing the nineteenth century or being killed by it;

her effort to escape nineteenth-century social and literary scripts was not just aesthetically motivated but was personally inspired as well. It grew out of a discovery of and a need to repudiate the ideological agendas and power imbalances replicated within these inherited forms, a discovery that inspired the search for new, more capacious, forms.

Thus, if for Stein the abandonment of the XIX century also carried personal implications as Berry argues, there are also significant points of coincidence with her –mostly male- contemporaries. For instance, Berry argues that Stein’s notion of “entity” found immediate predecessors in Craig, Pirandello, Cocteau and Maeterlinck, all of them also interested in focusing on the aesthetics of the present (1992: 41). Moreover, Stein’s determination to eliminate progressive teleology in her plays brings them closer to the aesthetic formulations of Eliot or Kandinsky. As Innes has argued, “[s]imply presenting a sequence of actions in a temporal and spatial frame evoked the ‘narrative method’ that Eliot rejected, along with Kandinsky, whose declaration that ‘the literary element, ‘storytelling’ or ‘anecdote’ must be abandoned’ was picked up by Pound and the Vorticists” (Innes 1999: 131-32). Undoubtedly, Stein’s determination to question imitation and the artistic projects of other movements shows a common concern with other avant-gardist movements. As Ryan (1984:42) has explained,

Stories violate not only the time sense of Stein’s aesthetic but its concept of entity, since they describe an event instead of incarnating it. She wanted to produce something ‘that was not description’ of an event but the event itself, in essence. It was an intent shared by abstract expressionist painters, whose pictures are less pictures of something than pictures with their own validity. In attempting this in the theatrical medium she allied herself with a major modern movement, which centered around Appia, Craig, and the new stagecraft.

Stein’s alliance with new directions in theatre also shows points of coincidence with the artistic principles of Maurice Maeterlinck. Their common interest in the denaturalization of the traditional plot structure of exposition-climax-dénouement brought both Stein and Maeterlinck to foster a new theatrical practice established upon the principle of staticism. As Marranca (1996:51) has argued,

Though much less radically, and with altogether different intentions, Maeterlinck carried a personal, spiritual vision of the natural world into drama, breaking down the conventional action/conflict-basic scenic structure into smaller units of nonaction, at times with repetitive, fragmentary sentences. Narration often substitutes for dramatic action, intuition for

speech, the sign for the thing. The notion of the figure in a landscape is central to his static, abstract plays, as it would be for Stein. In Maeterlinck's quiet drama the most cherished element was sense perception.

Thus, Maeterlinck's focus on the apprehension of the static moment in place of teleology and thus emphasize the theatricality of dramatic action also coincides with the premises found in the theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator, As Innes (1999:49) argues,

Meyerhold isolated each beat in a production, every 'episode' being played as an independent 'turn,' which produced highly exciting performances that emphasized 'theatricality' [...] 'Theatricality itself could be seen as the equivalent of the formalism that characterizes more literary expressions of Modernism, but in the theatre this led to the foregrounding of technology, not to abstraction, as Piscator's 'documentary' drama demonstrates.

Although Maeterlinck, Meyerhold, and Piscator share Stein's emphasis on the rejection of teleology with its resulting foregrounding of the illusion of the theatrical experience, Stein seemed to move a step farther from the avant-garde in **two** significant aspects. On the one hand, Stein clearly distinguished herself from avant-garde practices in the value she placed on the written text. Not anti-textual or antiliterary nor text-based like bourgeois theatre, Stein stands in a middle ground where language conforms the universe of the landscape but at the same time it is the integration of the visual into the watching experience what draws her close to the avant-garde's antitextualism as a manifesto against bourgeois society's obsession with the printed word (Harding 2000: 10).

The pairing of Stein with playwrights such as Maeterlinck or Piscator significantly paves the way for a reconsideration of the U.S. avant-garde and Stein's essays or plays testify to the points of coincidence with most of the formal –the crucial redefinition of the *mise-en-scène* and performance as artistic forms in their own right- aims of the European theatrical avant-garde. Stein's bold experimentation with and deconstruction of dramatic form, turning her plays into anti-realist and metatheatrical manifestos provided her with the overarching principles that guided her theatrical career. It is on these grounds that claims such as Aronson's, for instance, who surveys previous attempts at theatrical rebellion since the early years of the twentieth century -in the Little Theatre Movement and in plays by Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Zona Gale, Alfred Kreyborg- in order to find evidence of early avant-garde theatrical activity but concludes that "all these writers continued to work within a basically realistic framework and psychological character structure" (Aronson 2000: 2) can possibly be revised.

Stein's theatrical thought found expression in her 1934 essay "Plays", originally collected in *Lectures in America*, a forceful manifesto on theatricality and anti-realism that locates Stein within the renewal promoted by the theatrical avant-garde while at the same time paves the way for later developments in the twentieth century. Her arguments are based on her experience as a young theatergoer in Oakland, where she remembers that the plays she saw on stage –such as *Hamlet* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*- made her feel in "syncopated time in relation to the tempo of the play", which led to what she termed a feeling of nervousness. Thus, "nervousness consists in needing to go faster or to go slower so as to get together. It is that makes anybody feel nervous" (Stein 1935: XXX). According to Stein, syncopation and nervousness result in disparity of tempos between audience members and play. The nuisance comes from the play being established upon a linear narrative and, therefore, upon memory, which means that the audience has to remember what has happened or anticipate what will happen next. Stein, therefore, favoured the elimination of the story, since its dependence on progression reproduces the need to use memory in the cognitive process and, as a result, eliminates the present. As Stein explained in her apparently simple style, "everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story. What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many [...] I concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play" (Stein 1935: XLIV). The result was that what came to be Stein's pivotal aesthetic concept, "the apprehension of the present", was impossible to reach. As she explains in "Plays",

The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.

What this says is this.

Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play. This thing the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play (Stein 1935: XXIX).

Her words show Stein's life-long discard of narrativity in favor of the present, or what she also referred to as "the thing in itself" (Stein 1935: XLII). Such principles were larger components of art as she understood it, since "the business of Art as I tried to explain in *Composition as Explanation* is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present"

(Stein 1935: xxxvi). Hence, the “complete” expression of the present finds its full realization in a kind of theatre that is totally based on the attention to the non-eventful moment (Ryan 1984:17).

Stein’s medication for the theatre led to an aesthetic universe that centered upon the creation of an experience rather than on the representation of an event. The elimination of memory and narrativity in her effort to create a theatre that bracketed the present moment led to a dramaturgy that favoured the spatial dimension of plays. As Marranca (1995:xi) explains,

In her world, seeing has nothing to do with remembering, which is why she wanted to negate memory and intensify the present, continuous sense of becoming in space. This affirmation of space and ontological process underlies the phenomenological thinking Stein brought into the theatre, with its emphasis on observation and description, and the perception of an activity rather than its definition. She instinctively knew that modernity had to do with looking.

The materialization of the present resulted in a dramatic form that questioned traditional Aristotelian unities of action, time, and space as well as notions of progressive time, causality, and single point perspective (Ryan 1984: 15), concepts that came to be embodied under the term “landscape”, coined by Stein herself. In “Plays” she explained its origins (Stein 1935: XLVI):

Then I began to spend my summers in Bilignin in the department of the Ain and there I lived in a landscape that made itself its own landscape. I slowly came to feel that since the landscape was the thing, I had tried to write it down in Lucy Church Amiable and I did but I wanted even more really, in short I found that since the landscape was the thing, a play was a thing and I went on writing plays a great many plays. The landscape at Bilignin so completely made a play that I wrote quantities of plays. I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance.

The concept of landscape allowed Stein to embrace “the thing in itself”, to embody things that are “there”, where “nothing really moves”, nothing really happens (Stein 1935: L), in which the present can be apprehended without any dependence on memory or teleology. Thus, Stein’s conception of a dramaturgy that captures time resulted in a profoundly self-reflexive aesthetic that Stein took to its

artistic limits in her extremely experimental early plays and remained a hallmark of her later production.

Beyond Stein's use of the concept of landscape to embody the static theatre derived from the apprehension of the present, the use of the concept demonstrates her dialogue with the artistic avant-garde. Although Stein's plays remained profoundly idiosyncratic, her fundamental rejection of realistic principles was consistent with the rejection of realism that the European theatrical avant-garde promoted. In this sense, it is interesting to remember that the beginnings of Stein's dramatic writing run parallel to the establishment of realistic principles on the stage and literature at large in the United States and Europe (Murphy 1987: 86). Like other modernists such as Ezra Pound or D. H. Lawrence, Stein defined her writing in opposition to the nineteenth century both as a chronological concept and as an aesthetic one (Ryan 1984: 2). In her own words, "I was there to begin to kill what was not dead, the nineteenth century which was so sure of evolution and prayers, and Esperanto and their ideas" (Qtd. in Gass 1973: 6). The nineteenth century meant to copy from a model, a linear narrative: concepts that, according to Stein, had no place in the new twentieth century. Thus, like other surrealist, Dadaist or Symbolist playwrights, Stein's determination to render the present and make it a cognitive experience for the audience ran counter to coherent notions of dramatic structure, character description, or dialogue, showing that theatrical illusion was inexistent. Her aesthetic notion of theatrical presentation questions the "truthful" artistic representation of reality advocated by realism with psychologically believable characters, a fixed dramatic structure –whether that of the five-act play in the case of James or a more "natural" one as advocated by Howells– or the use of dialogue as a mode of characterization in which a consistency between dialogue and character leads to the assumption that clever characters should say clever things (Murphy 1987: 31-49). Bay-Cheng also places Stein in the anti-realistic tradition of the European avant-garde, since "realistic representation was considered abhorrent to the artists of the avant-garde, resulting in the flagrant violation of basic principles of conventional drama and speech and the appearance of anti-textualism" (2004: 10). Thus, if the logical progression of plot was the foundation basis for realist and naturalist drama, the avant-garde discarded any linearity or determination in plot or character while at the same time searching for a new form of theatre language that would be non-representational (Bay-Cheng 2004: 9).

Despite the obvious differences between Stein's project and realistic aesthetic premises, it is interesting to note how both positions are established upon similar starting premises. If realism advocated for an artistic representation of reality on stage, the use of dialogue as a mode of characterization – with a consistency between dialogue and character: clever characters should say clever things –, a didactic aim, psychologically believable characters and a specific dramatic structure – whether that of the five-act play in the case of James or a more "natural" one as advocated by Howells – (Murphy 1987: 31-49), Stein's theatre both formally and

thematically showed theatre as an artefact with all the implications about the act of reading and watching that postmodernism and the critique of realism have emphasized. Despite the obvious differences between the two artists, there are also some striking characteristics. Although realism never seemed to be an aesthetic option for Stein, she shared, though, the basic realistic tenet that saw its artistic practice as being related to the immediate context. In both cases, they see their art as springing from a new situation, a new context. James A. Herne (1897: 8-9) refers to such a role in the creation of an “Art for truth’s sake”:

[Art] serves its time and place, and fertilizes the art to come. The artist of today is the medium for expression of the art of today, fertilized by race memories of past ages of art – more perfect by reason of the struggles, the failures, the inferiority, and the sublimity of ages of art [...] The truth does not belong to the time, for truth is for all time; but for the form which that truth shall take, the greatest artist must depend upon the age in which he lives

Herne’s artistic conception could not be closer to that of Stein’s. Although she would not acknowledge the idea of a tradition before her, what Herne is referring to as “race”, she does locate the artist in the immediate social context. As she explains in “Composition as Explanation”, “[n]o one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept. And they refuse to accept it for a very simple reason and that is that they do not have to accept it for any reason” (Stein, 1926:520). Thus, Stein saw her dramatic and literary aesthetic at large as being directly related to the context. As she explains (Qtd. in Ryan 1984:7) in “How Writing is Written”, it is the present what the artist can best reflect:

Each generation has to do with what you would call the daily life: and a writer, painter, or any sort of creative artist, is not at all ahead of his time. He is contemporary. He can’t live in the past because it is gone. He can’t live in the future because no one knows what it is. He can live only in the present of his daily life. He is expressing the thing that is being expressed by everybody else in their daily lives.

The twentieth century had brought about a new way of seeing the world, a new means of perception, undoubtedly related to the technological and scientific revolution: the plane became the embodiment of the new era. Seeing the land from above one could have a sense of the global, which is what interested Stein about cubism,

The automobile is the end of progress on the earth, it goes quicker but essentially the landscapes seen from an automobile are the same as the landscapes seen from a carriage, a train, a waggon [sic.], or in walking. But the earth seen from an airplane is something else. So the twentieth century is not the same as the nineteenth century and it is very interesting knowing that Picasso has never seen the earth from an airplane, that being of the twentieth century he inevitably knew that the earth is not the same as in the nineteenth century, he knew it, he made it, inevitably he made it different and what he made is a thing that now all the world can see" (Stein 1938: 49-50).

Most significantly, Stein shared in with the basic realistic tenet that saw artistic practice as resulting from the immediate context. In "Composition as Explanation" she explained her vision of art: "no one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept. And they refuse to accept it for a very simple reason and that is that they do not have to accept it for any reason" (Stein 1926: 520). Stein's words show her fascination with the present as a means to underscore daily life's connection to the times and its relation to a new mode of perception that resulted from the technological and scientific revolution that came with the new twentieth century. Against the narrativity and linear progression of the nineteenth century and such popular forms as the melodrama or the realist novel, Stein, in her effort to capture the present established close bonds between her writing and other major artistic developments of the time. It was especially cubism and the work of Picasso that Stein related herself to.

It is in this field where the connections between Stein's writing and the avant-garde can be most clearly appreciated, since she also participated the recovery of a dialogue with other cultural and artistic fields, a key characteristic of the different avant-gardist practices. As Cardullo (2001:2s) explains,

What becomes apparent . . . is that the new movements were fed by the other arts as much as they were provoked by conventional drama itself. Poets, painters, filmmakers, musical composers, circus performers, architects, choreographers, photographers, cartoonists, sculptors – any but professional or commercial dramatists – were the models and sources for the radical shift in the aesthetics of theatre and drama . . . Because the traditional theatre provided little in the way of precedent, this new theatre grew heavily upon iconoclastic movements within the plastic arts, with the result that traditional barriers between theatre, dance, music, and art began to crumble.

Thus, in the determination to find a new theatrical language that would feed itself from the stark opposition to traditional drama as well as the new languages of different artistic practices, it is not surprising to note that Stein saw in Picasso her artistic mate. Actually, ever since her arrival in Paris Stein together with her brother Leo started one of the most impressive painting collections in Western Europe. They were actually the first to buy a Picasso and Stein became the subject-matter for his famous Portrait of Gertrude Stein. Even the coinage of the term landscape undoubtedly links Stein with the pictorial tradition of which she was so fond of thus underscoring the influence that painting had in her writing. As Bowers explains, “when Stein calls her plays landscapes, she is drawing an analogy to a genre of art—the landscape painting. In imagining her plays as landscape paintings, Stein was able to free herself from dramatic conventions and to experiment with new forms that had their source in contemporary painting, not in dramatic literature” (Bowers 2005: 121).

If Stein’s aesthetic thought for the theatre is still to receive full recognition in the academia, the politics of representation embedded in her notion of landscape and embodiment of the present have advanced many characteristics of what has come to constitute literary postmodernism. From the very beginnings, Stein’s plays challenged realism’s basic assumption that reality is an empirically verifiable entity that can be apprehended and translated on to the stage (Murphy 1987: 25) by showing that theatrical illusion is a fallacy. As Pladott (1990:112) has argued,

[...] Stein takes on the tendency of the theatrical medium to mask more effectively than any other the fact that it is a structured and codified process of signification. The convergence of the spectator with the physical presence of iconic signs (in Pierce’s terms), namely, the actors and the performance’s sights and sounds, foster the illusion that the staged play is an unmediated reality rather than a rule-governed semiotic exchange. Stein repeatedly foregrounds and unmasks this illusion. By refusing to abide by the traditional rules of dramatic writing, she also calls into question many assumptions about the means whereby meaning is produced and about the relationship of signification to the object signified.

Pladott’s assertion about the fundamental autoreferentiality of Stein’s theatre in its questioning of theatrical realism is certainly right in assuming Stein’s questioning of the means by which meaning is produced. Possibly, this is the reason why some still question that Stein’s plays merit the label “dramatic” in the sense of them being texts that contain a certain degree of dramatic elements that allows them to be considered as plays. Certainly, there is no narrativity and no crisis-resolution, which allows her plays to be deemed dramatic failures when judged against traditional

dramatic parameters. Stein carried out a fundamental revision of dramatic writing through the apprehension of the present, a notion that clashed with realistic artistic practices. As Sutherland explains, “present movement within a space, or space, or a space [sic.] of time became her ultimate reality, as it was the reality of the movies and of America generally. But taking it deliberately as the first condition and the last orientation of writing and of plays brought her into direct contradiction with the traditional theory of drama” (1951: 114). Stein’s will to apprehend the present led her to create a series of plays that show the ways in which theatre is sustained upon a mimetic fallacy and clearly distinguish themselves from the realistic and Aristotle tradition. As Ryan (1984:15) explains,

The evolution of strategies for composition of a literature to correspond directly with the ‘now’ – the exact moment of her perception – was Gertrude Stein’s singular purpose during the first half of the twentieth century. Her resulting writing style represents a rejection of the Western literary tradition based on Aristotelian concepts of progressive time, causality, and single point perspective.

Thus, Stein’s plays show the ways in which despite the apparent naturalness of representation there is always a “non-natural” element. In this sense, Stein’s theatre emphasizes the construction of the theatrical fallacy and attempts to lay bare the rules that conform dramatic structure. Her plays thus result in a metatheatrical and antiillusionistic theatre that Stein explicitly relates to the new twentieth century (Ryan 1984:10),

Her work can be seen as an effort by one [...] human being to cope with a new experience of existence and articulate that experience in language. She believed that the modes which had characterized the Western literary tradition heretofore – single perspective, progressive development, transition, and causal connection – were no longer adequate.

Stein’s laying bare of the processes by which theatre constructs itself constitutes, perhaps, her most clear contribution to later theatrical developments and specifically, to the development of a theatrical avant-garde in the United States in the 1950s. It is not surprising, then, that Stein became such an appealing playwright to a generation that was searching for alternative ways to interpret reality, create an active audience or lay bare the politics of all representation. The evidence of Stein’s dialogue with cultural trends of the times shows, as I have argued, that Stein was part of the artistic and cultural momentum of the early twentieth century. Such an assumption leads inevitably to the reassessment of the avant-garde in the United States. It is in Cardullo and Knopf’s pioneering consideration of Stein as an avant-

garde playwright that shows how a recognition of Stein's contribution to the history of American theatre can lead to a reassessment of this very same history. Given the pervasive influence of Stein in the theatre developments of the second half of the twentieth century we might risk arguing that she was, after all, wrong in her assumption that "no one is ahead of his time". She probably was.

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