

# Gertrude Stein and Expatriation

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The initial impetus behind this study was the question of how to most accurately describe Gertrude Stein's physical separation from the United States. Labeling that separation as expatriation means a tangle of definitions and counter-definitions and popular impressions, all of them inappropriate in describing Stein. Many of these stereotypical images of American expatriates stem from Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*, written in the early 1930s and his *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation*, published in the early 1970s. In his texts, Cowley presents a well-intentioned but contradictory portrait of American expatriates of the "lost generation." His depictions are simultaneously exiles, rejected and driven out by a closed and unaccepting society, and expatriates, individuals voluntarily withdrawing, even fleeing, a nation of unsophisticated and vulgar people of a low cultural and intellectual level. This image has come to be the definitive example of American expatriation, and yet it does not correspond to Stein. It was Gertrude Stein who, in her work, contributed to the re-shaping of expatriation from a quarrelsome turning of one's back on the vulgar, unsophisticated, and anti-intellectual United States, to a fruitful encounter with one's homeland that could provide not only useful and interesting subject matter, but a new perspective and especially a new language to inject life into the worn-out literary language of English.

This contradiction between Cowley's depictions of the American expatriate attitude towards America and Stein's own opinions on the same subject led to the realization that there is a need to redefine what it means to be an American "expatriate." The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore the notion, in light of what we know of Stein's experience, that

expatriation for Americans represents, as it does for Cowley's subjects, a rejection of the United States in favor of a more amenable and foreign culture.

The problem with any analysis of this kind is that it risks claiming that the individual on whom it focuses is the one "true" representation of the study at hand. Using Stein as the standard of measure, that is insisting that each individual American expatriate, to be called an expatriate, must behave as Stein did, is simply to add one more biased individual portrait which leaves the initial problem of definition unresolved.

Instead of re-defining the word, therefore, it is more productive to redefine the stakes involved in any examination of American expatriates and expatriation. At stake for us should not be an individual definition of what it is to be an American expatriate, but an all-encompassing notion that each individual who leaves his/her geographical boundaries is an expatriate in a different way. This view itself is more in accordance with the idea that Stein's expatriation was not a withdrawal from her homeland, but a move to freedom, a freedom that permitted her to have greater appreciation for that homeland. This view is also closer to Stein's notion of an all-embracing America of which anyone who feels her American cultural roots is a part, no matter where she is.

The result of such a notion is a reconciliation of two aspects of American expatriation — that is, physical absence from one's homeland and metaphorical distance from convention — with the notion of being a good citizen of the home society. As absence brings one closer and being outside of convention can be conventional, being American becomes, for Stein, a privilege that expands well beyond arbitrary physical borders to reach to all individuals everywhere who share the same cultural roots.

Contrary to some popular myths (many of them promulgated by Stein herself), the actual reasons for Gertrude Stein's expatriation appear to have been rather banal. Professionally, Stein was adrift. Medicine had lost its appeal for her and, as she failed and refused to repeat a required course at Johns Hopkins, her medical career came to an end. Personally, Stein had been involved in a love affair with a woman in New York that had unfortunately reached an unpleasant and disappointing impasse. By going to Paris, Stein was hoping to give herself some direction. As Shari Benstock

puts it, “Gertrude Stein's expatriation from America constituted an escape from a life that...seemed directionless” (13).

In this sense Stein's move eastward across the Atlantic is an echo of the American move westward across the plains. The economic possibilities of obtaining land and therefore some degree of financial freedom and independence in the West, as well as the psychological possibilities of starting a “new” life in a “new” land, were tempting for people seeking a fresh start.

Although travelling in the opposite direction, Stein's decision to move overseas parallels this pattern of economic and psychological motivation on many levels. To begin with, the economic motivations for going to Europe were very great. Stein, who lived off a modest family income, was able to live “quietly, but well” in Paris, with full financial independence.<sup>1</sup> Psychologically, Europe represented a fresh-start for Stein, a chance to escape from her unwanted past into a new world of personal freedom where she could start her life over again.

Stein's move thus emphasized a typically American characteristic of hers, derived in American culture from both immigration and westward migration, namely, mobility. As George W. Pierson describes it:

if all men have the ability to move, and many the opportunity, not all have developed the proclivity — the desire and habit of movement — and few if any societies have absorbed spatial mobility as profoundly into their own way of life as we have done in [America]. (x)

Later in her life, Stein makes the same claim of mobility or “moving” as an “American thing”:

Think of anything, of cowboys, of movies, of detective stories, of anybody who goes anywhere or stays at home and is an American and you will realize that it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always with moving and my first real effort to express this thing which is an American thing began in writing *The Making of Americans*. (*Selected Writings* 258)

For Stein, observation reveals that Americans relate space to moving,

whether it be geographical space, such as the American West, or abstract space, such as a space of time. This characteristic of Americans is reproduced regardless of where Americans are located in space or time. Thus Stein's own mobility as manifested in her expatriation exhibits a uniquely American expression, not an escape from her native land, but a close identification with it. No matter where Stein or any American goes, she will still demonstrate "American character." "Our roots can be anywhere and...we take our roots with us,'...'The essential thing is to have the feeling they exist.'" (Spencer 210)

This assertion also indicates that, for Stein, "America" is more than just a geographic location. "America" functions on a variety of different levels, including a geographical space, but also as a signifier for mobility and freedom of movement. The "inherent mobility" of Americans demonstrated in Stein's expatriation therefore becomes not just a physical displacement but a metaphorical manifestation of Stein's cultural roots. In this sense, far from being a rejection of her native land, Stein's expatriation can be seen as an embracing of that land and as an opportunity for her to move closer to it by moving away from it.

On yet a different level, Stein's expatriation takes on another very American form of expression as it allows her to take hold of her own life and assert her independence. As many pioneers were able to take control of their lives and declare their independence in the West, so Stein was able to do the same in her expatriation. Before going to Paris, Stein appeared to be a quiet, somewhat passive and "phlegmatic" individual, similar, as one critic has pointed out, to Adele, Stein's fictional twin in *Q.E.D.* Once abroad, however, she began to forge her own assertiveness. A new Gertrude began to emerge, slowly but steadily taking hold until the force of her new personality finally drove her brother Leo from their home in 1914. As Benstock tells us, before she left the United States, Stein's

ego seems underdeveloped, and there is an obvious lack of purpose and direction to her life in those early years. A definite change occurred after her arrival in Paris, perhaps born of her efforts to shed the protective shell Leo had provided for so long and to achieve a measure of independence. (14-15)

Before her move abroad, under societal and familial pressures, Stein

kept a tight rein on a certain side of her personality. That she was able gradually to liberate these elements of her personality once she moved to Paris demonstrates the enabling power of her expatriation to distance herself from those pressures and recreate herself in the image she chose.

That Stein's pioneer-like efforts in expatriation managed to attain control for her over her own life is also reflected in the liberation Stein found from restrictive American social codes obliging individuals to conform to certain sexual norms. Once outside America, Stein was able to live an openly lesbian life with her lover Alice Toklas. The "consequences of her sexual orientation toward women," as well as "the effects of her national identity as an American," are cited by Shari Benstock as "two important factors in Stein's personal development" and two important themes in her work (14). These themes could never have been part of Stein's work had she not found the freedom to experience them that expatriation brought her.

Although Stein at first literally shared a space with her brother, and later on with her lifelong lover Alice Toklas, figuratively, she was struggling to appropriate the expatriate "space" as her own from which to write. Away from American late nineteenth-century culture and out of the shadow of Leo and the "old" Gertrude, Stein was able to carve out her own "space." The creation of this space was indispensable to Stein's "privacy and personal freedom to live and write as she pleased" (Benstock 14). It was not the presence of her new-found country that inspired Stein to write, but the absence of her homeland, the absence of a stable culture that opened up this space and informed her writing. The notion of being an outsider to both her native land and to the land in which she lived, far from being a source of anxiety and mental displacement, enabled Stein to write. Laying claim to this space allowed Stein to redefine her life in terms of her new location, to eradicate her pre-Paris life, and to transcend the social codes that would otherwise have "locked her in" and prevented her genius from manifesting itself.

Again this echoes an important element in the American move westward, that is, the physical freedom which landownership entailed. Just as westward-moving settlers were able to appropriate their own physical space, so Stein's expatriation allowed her the opportunity to carve out a psychological niche, to create her own inviolable space in which to live and grow. To borrow words from J. Gerald Kennedy in his *Imagining Paris*,

while landownership provided American pioneers with “the grounding which would allow them to locate and define their lives” (xii), Stein's economic and psychological autonomy in expatriation guaranteed the “grounding” necessary which would allow her both to delineate who she really wanted to be and to write as that individual she had forged. As Stein herself said, “Owning a place of your own is what gives you independence and lets you stand on your own feet, and no body is rich unless he owns his own soil” (*Gertrude Stein's America* 82).

Because all of the above elements in Stein's life abroad are not contradictory, but rather supportive of the American approach to mobility and living, the seeming contradiction in Stein's life that although she left her homeland, she continued to write about and celebrate it becomes not only natural, but predictable. In Paris, Stein “began to write in earnest. She had found both a place and a subject that suited her” (Benstock 14), that is, her own biography and the effects of her “Americanness” on it. It was Stein's examination of herself not as an expatriate American, but as an American that led her more and more in the years that followed to determine that Americans are Americans wherever they are:

America was and now is made and Americans are Americans the people who solemnly concern themselves with aesthetic things think that it makes a difference where Americans are. Of course it does not. Americans having been made....Americans can be wherever they are and they make arrangements accordingly. (Stein, *Reflections* 160) 2

Many pioneers had sought the “freedom of self-determination that was provided by” the western frontier. In this way Stein, by moving to Europe, was not renouncing her American heritage, nor even criticizing it. Instead she was seeking the same autonomy that her American forebears had sought in their migration in the opposite direction. Expatriation thus becomes a figure for a certain conceptual space and the process of creating that space, just as the West became a figure for freedom and independence.

Nowhere is this figure more evident in Stein's writing than in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. The *Autobiography* is in some sense the necessary outcome of Stein's expatriate experience in the way it iterates and lends literal credence to Stein's interpretation of her own life. The title alone

is significant for the artfulness it reveals. As no one can write the autobiography of another person, Stein's title signals the fictional nature of the text, yet the text is carefully written in the guise of a "true story," and, surprisingly, many critics have taken its anecdotes to be true and factual accounts of real historical events. What is significant for us and for expatriation is the way in which Stein is able to recreate her own life in writing and to make of it what she wants, drawing the reader in to the point where what Stein clearly states as fiction becomes accepted as reality. The text exposes the successful project of Stein's expatriation, which was to carve out her own existence and take active hold of her own destiny. As she states in *What Are Masterpieces* (1922-36), "And so I am an American and I have lived half my life in Paris, not the half that made me but the half in which I made what I made." In Paris, in expatriation, Stein found the freedom and the power to write her own life "as she was going to write it," a text possessing an unreal smoothness that "sounded not so loud and not sounding so loud . . . sounded pretty well" (quoted in *G. Stein's America* 63). George Wickes asserts in his *Americans in Paris* that Stein "says she wrote the *Autobiography* in six weeks, but she and Alice had been rehearsing the materials for twenty-five years" (56). Thus what Stein claims as the story of her life is something which she has rehearsed for years; she does not just write the events that happened, she stylizes, she crafts her own life to be what she wants; she creates her own legend. This makes Stein herself a fictional construct. Stein gives her life a smoothness as if all that happened to her was meant in some way to be; no struggles, no hesitations, no unhappiness, except that which she enters into the text. In other words, she had total control over her life in the same way an author controls the lives of her characters or a pioneer controls her own destiny. By writing the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein is showing her readers the process through which she created herself in expatriation and thus, or as a result, in writing.

In her later text, *Four in America*, written between 1932 and 1933, Stein describes George Washington as a writer of novels:

George Washington was fairly famous because he wrote what he saw and he saw what he said. And this is what I do. And so what do I do. I say he wrote what he said he did. And he did do what he saw he did. Oh yes he did. (168)

For Gertrude Stein, Washington writes “what he saw,” but what he saw is no abstract “truth” or “reality,” for “he saw what he said.” In other words, what he saw had no real existence outside of his words. This is, according to Stein, what she does, and indeed is what she did throughout her work and her life. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Four in America*, and most importantly, as this paper argues, in Stein's understanding of the experience of expatriation itself, there is an urgency for Stein to construct her existence so that she may transcend it.



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*Note, Notes, Anmerkungen*

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- 1) Financial independence was, of course, indispensable for a woman's “freedom” at this time. It might be interesting to speculate on how Stein's life—and the life of another expatriate American women such as Natalie Barney—might have been different had each been financially dependent.
- 2) It might be worthwhile to note the last sentence: “It is only those who concern themselves with aesthetic things critically and academically being several generations behind themselves can really believe when they think these things” (*Reflections* 160). Written in 1931, is this a commentary on the wave of expatriate writers and critics who had such disdain for America and Americans?



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*Opere Citate, Works Cited*

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