Homes Away from Home: The Intimate Geographies of Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein

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ABSTRACT
In exploring multiple and shifting definitions of “home” as private domestic space, as nation of origin or adoption, and as a powerful literary metaphor for identity and security, this paper focuses on the efforts at homemaking away from home by two expatriate American women writers, Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein. At the turn of the 20th century, Buck, the child of missionaries in remote China, and Stein, at the vanguard of a cultural revolution in Paris, created homes away from their native America in real life and in creative work. While Buck and Stein diverge greatly in style, cultural perspective and literary reputation, they appear together in this paper because in their work both focus on issues of home and “intimate” uses of geography and location. Each in her own way pondered issues of national and cultural origins as well, in particular her relationship with her native America and with the other places she called home. In making homes abroad, each went through a process of disengagement from cultural and familial expectations and restrictions, as well as from conventional gender roles. Furthermore, these writers anticipated theoretical concerns of a later era: For Buck, these included resistance to imperial ambitions, negotiations in cross-cultural contact zones, and provocative perspectives on cultural and biological hybridity. Stein meanwhile was preoccupied with intimate “domestic” relationships, in particular the long-term partnership with Alice Toklas that she guarded carefully in the physical space of their home in Paris as well as in her writing. Stein also cultivated her “home” in friendships with an international community of avant-garde artists; these associations constitute an essential feature of the salon-home that is revealed in some of her most celebrated works.
In their various efforts to establish a home outside the usual neighborhood, Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein each in art and in life laid the foundation for a new way of thinking about dwelling in the world.

**Keywords**: Pearl Buck, Gertrude Stein, domestic, home, women traveler, cross-cultural home, hybridity, expatriate, travel
鄉關何處：賽珍珠與葛楚德・史坦的私密地理書寫

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摘 要

在探索「原鄉」多樣而變動的定義上：個人私密的居處空間、原生或收養的國籍，或作爲身份認證上一個有力的文學隱喻，本文將聚焦於兩位移居海外的美國女性作家，賽珍珠與葛楚德・史坦，在原鄉之外建構故鄉的努力。賽珍珠是長於遙遠中國的傳教士之女；史坦則是巴黎文化革命的先導，生活於二十世紀之交，處於遙遠地域的這兩位作家，在其真實生活及文學隱喻之下，創造出一個遠離她們祖國美國的原鄉。雖然，賽珍珠與史坦在文風和文化觀照上，有著極大的歧異，但在本文中之所以將她們兩人並置，是因爲在其生命及書寫中，地理及位置實占有舉足輕重的角色。兩位作家在作品中，均反覆去推敲自己與祖國美國，及與其他足以被自己稱爲原鄉的地方之間，究竟存在著何種關係，並試圖去探討這些關係的本質。而就在兩人於現實與虛構中，爲自己建構原鄉的同時，其也歷經了一個脫離文化及家庭的預期與限制，並脫離傳統性別角色的過程。更有甚者，兩位作家也投身於下世紀一些理論性的關注中。就賽珍珠而言，這些包含了對帝國主義野心的抗拒、在跨文化場域中進行的協商、以及對文化及生物學上的「混血」概念，所採用的煽動性觀點。於此同時，史坦全神貫注於其私密的「家庭」韻事上，特別是她在自己與愛麗絲・托克拉斯同居的巴黎住所及其書寫中，均小心翼翼維護著的那份長久以來的友伴情誼。史坦並也將她的「原鄉」，建置於自己與一個跨國社群（以前衛派藝術家爲成員）的友情中，而這樣的關係也導致了沙龍成爲她最受好評的幾部作品中的核心特色。賽珍珠與葛楚德・史坦，她們不遺餘力地試圖將「原鄉」建置在傳統的居處場域之外，而在兩人的努力下，她們也的確在人文藝術與生活上，爲以一個新的角度去思索居處於這個世界中的問題，奠下了基礎。

關鍵詞：賽珍珠、葛楚德・史坦、家庭的、原鄉、女性旅者、跨文化場域下的原鄉、混血
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The domestic management guides so popular in nineteenth-century America speak to the embeddedness of the private household within the national enterprise. In these manuals, the domestic sphere, with women at the epicenter, serves as a staging ground for the development of national identity. Testifying to the integral importance—rather than separateness—of the private sphere for public life, Catherine Beecher dedicated her influential best-selling *American Woman’s Home* to “the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the republic, as moulded by the early training and preserved amid the maturer influences of home.”

Viewing the domestic as a continuum from family household to nation, it comes as no surprise that the “foreign” has long been defined as “away from home,” in both an extra-domestic and extra-national sense, as Amy Kaplan points out in her groundbreaking article, “Manifest Domesticity” (183). Conceptions of home have always been dependent to a degree upon place, often upon situation in a national home. But to what degree is “home” dependent upon place? If elements of this equation—the home itself, and the women in them, making these homes—were to be abstracted, removed from the “original” place, set adrift from the usual markers, what then? How is home “rewritten” elsewhere?

The conception of home as a series of concentric circles emanating from the woman-tended hearth to encompass the greater community and nation itself is provocative but not new, even in nineteenth-century America. Penelope kept the home fires burning for Odysseus, who upon his

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1 Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home, or Principles of Domestic Science* (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1869; reprinted Hartford: The Stowe-Day Foundation, 1987). As Kathryn Kish Sklar points out, other domestic guides of the period took the opposite tack; for one example, the influential and long-running *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, edited by Sarah Hale, promoted the ideology of separate spheres, in which men out in the public realm concentrated on “acquisitive pursuits” while women in the home “concentrated on the moral role [. . .] women’s labor was unsullied by the business mentality.” *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1976) 63.
long-anticipated return to Ithaca first helped his wife put the house in order before reestablishing himself on his throne. His triumph in both arenas was made possible by the strength of his wife’s character, who in the classical world and beyond has served as an exemplar of domestic virtue, for her skill in weaving and for her fidelity. By contrast, Penelope’s contemporaries Helen and Clytemnestra, lacking homely virtues, ruined nations in wrecking homes.

Like the ceaseless activity of actual homemaking, so the study of it continues. Scholarly attention to the issue of “home” has become intense in recent decades, with work emerging across a range of fields. In studying how human beings create homes, geographers focus on topography to determine how landscape shapes social and cultural activities: “Humans occupy space and use symbols to transform it into place; they are creatures of habit who appropriate place and context as home” (Terkenli 325). A social science approach to the creation of home-space may address factors including gender, race and age, social status, economic and education levels. The phenomenologist Martin Heidegger posed questions as to how human beings feel at home in the world, and how home is made meaningful as “dwelling” in “the process by which the place in which we exist becomes a personal home” (Seamon 8). Architects and city planners concern themselves with built spaces and shelters, focusing on the materials, dimensions and physical arrangements that make spaces habitable, comfortable and familiar. Historical circumstances have also reshaped

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2 Theano S. Terkenli. “Home as a Region,” Geographical Review 85.3 (July 1995) 324-34. Other important studies include Yi-fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1977); Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness ( Pion Ltd: London, 1976); Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: U California P, 1997); and Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World (Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1993).

3 An overview of issues and literature on the subject is provided in a bibliography edited by Harvey C. Perkins, David C. Thorns, A. Winstanley and B. Newton, The Study of Home from a Social Scientific Perspective: An Annotated Bibliography, 2nd ed. (House and Home Project, Canterbury and Lincoln Universities, 2002).


notions of home; the record of wars, disasters, the rise and fall of governments and forced and voluntary migration that marked the twentieth century necessitated the reconstitution of millions of homes. Whole nations were created—Israel, Pakistan and dozens of new countries since the breakup of the Soviet Union, for instance, each “birth” giving rise to new tensions and making necessary new accommodations in patterns of migration and homecoming.6 Further, the growth of cosmopolitan urban centers in the process of globalization and concurrent cross-currents of migration has given rise to new models of human congregation and new textures and dimensions in the living spaces situated in urban centers.7

In this paper I explore the relationship between home and place as revealed in the efforts of homemaking by women writers who spent long periods outside their native America. My subjects were not travelers or exiles in the usual sense, but a different sort of sojourner: women who made their homes “elsewhere,” with foresight and deliberation, in fact and in fiction. Pearl Buck, the child of missionaries to China, and Gertrude Stein, at the vanguard of a cultural revolution in early 20th-century Paris, are far-ranging figures who differed greatly in their motives for leaving “home,” in the places they came to inhabit, the genres they worked in, and the reputation each enjoyed. Yet each responded deeply to the notion of home, in her life and in her work.


Buck and Stein appear together in this paper chiefly because in their work issues of home place, geography and cultural situation figure prominently. Their multi-layered experiences as expatriates, as creative artists, and as women make them valuable subjects for exploring multiple and shifting definitions of “home”—as private domestic space, as nation of origin or adoption, and as a powerful literary metaphor for identity and security. Each writer ponders the nature of her relationship with her native America and with the other places she called home. In making homes for themselves, each went through a process of disengagement from cultural and familial expectations and restrictions, as well as from conventional gender roles. Furthermore, these writers anticipated theoretical concerns of a later era: For Buck, these included resistance to imperial ambitions, negotiations in cross-cultural contact zones, and provocative perspectives on cultural and biological hybridity. Stein meanwhile was preoccupied with intimate “domestic” relationships, in particular the long-term partnership with Alice Toklas that she guarded carefully in the physical space of their home in Paris as well as in her writing. Stein also cultivated her “home” in friendships with an international community of avant-garde artists; these associations constitute an essential feature of the salon-home that is revealed in some of her most celebrated works.

In their various efforts to establish homes outside the usual neighborhood, Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein laid a foundation in art and in life for a new way of thinking about dwelling in the world. Both Buck and Stein produced textual “homes” that recorded the adjustments they made to an “alien” environment in order to live and work productively. Their texts reveal “home” as a work in endless progress, improvised and pieced together from old habits and new resources. Living abroad, both came to discover that “To build a new house or to settle in a new territory is a fundamental project, equivalent perhaps to a repetition of the founding of the world,” as the geographer Edward Relph has written (83).

The matter of “home”—as shaped by place, national identity, cultural context, gender roles and memory—is a knot of intimate and often perplexing issues. To some degree of course all geography is intimate: We respond to places viscerally; we carry map points on our nerve endings. Memories of places, particularly the sites of the most important events in our lives or in our family’s history, may bind us forever to a particular identity,
as Hawthorne’s narrator in “The Custom House” would till in perpetuity that ancient plot of earth in Salem where his ancestors had “mingled their earthy substance with the soil” (8). What is intimate can also serve as a source of strength; both Buck and Stein thrived on the multiple points of reference they acquired in homemaking in “alien” places. “Intimate” has also to do with the degree to which each writer inserted herself into her picture of home in the new place: In her fiction, Buck took pains to efface herself and the Western world to make room for China, while in numerous works Stein seemed to divide herself and her experience into public and private selves, with clearly delineated roles in each sphere.

Indeed the most “intimate geography” is the sense of belonging to a place, which arises from interactions between self and environment that bridge the private-public divide: “People construct their geographies of home at the interface between their self and their world” (Terkenli 325). Should elements in this “interface” be reorganized, the impact on one’s sense of home can be profound; “dislocation,” such as that experienced by Buck and Stein, increases one’s sensitivity to place, both challenging and distorting perception:

Home does not become an issue until it is no longer there or is being lost, because the concept of home is constructed on the division of personally known worlds into home and nonhome contexts [. . .] With distance from home a person is temporarily or permanently dissociated from it and becomes both more conscious of its role in life and increasingly appreciative of its inherent qualities. (Terkenli 328)

**Pearl Buck At Home in China**

Long before notions of contact zones, borderlands, cultural hybridity and heteroglossia had an important place in academic conversations, there was Pearl Buck. Raised in China by missionary parents who devoted their lives to the optimistic American proposition that cultural fusion was possible, and that traditionally Buddhist Chinese could be made over into Christians, Buck worked all her life to bring East and West together, in fiction and in charitable endeavors such as the Welcome House she established for
abandoned Amerasian children.8 Negotiating the cultural, social, linguistic and aesthetic terrain of several worlds, worlds so unlike in language, history, social organization and guiding philosophy as to seem different planets, Buck was to fashion of her experience a new image of China for the West. Biographer Peter Conn points out that Buck was one of the first to make “an effort to change America’s literary discourse by introducing a multicultural perspective” (Lipscomb 111). Buck’s oeuvre should be read as a vision of a foreign culture illuminated by an artist who was both insider and outsider to that culture, at precisely the “contingent, in-between” point Homi Bhabha cites as the space where the “experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2).9

In her work Buck demonstrates not only the possibilities for cultural hybridity but the challenges to such potential as well. I believe that her deep separate understanding of two markedly different cultures contributed in an odd but inevitable way to her failure in bringing these two closer together. Because she succeeds at capturing so fully and sensitively one cultural reality (Chinese, most often), faithfully recording her personal experience, she fails to achieve a meeting of the twain, to draw East and West together. In her fiction Buck scrupulously adheres to realistic descriptive techniques; thus The Good Earth, her most famous work, is fully immersed in a racially homogeneous Chinese society, with Westerners and Western references largely excluded. But when Buck writes Westerners into the picture, as in the biographies of her parents or in the early novel East Wind: West Wind, the balance shifts, and the American cultural point of view dominates.

Buck was aware of the divided nature of her “home” in China, as attested by the title of her autobiography, My Several Worlds.

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8 Buck biographer Peter Conn, who adopted a child from Buck’s Welcome House, remarks on this objective in her work: “Though she had lived her entire life in two societies that valued racial separation and enforced racial hierarchies, Pearl remained committed to integration, intermixture and equality [. . .] she used a homely comparison to make her point: ‘Hybrid rose, hybrid corn and hybrid fruit should teach us a lesson that we are reluctant to learn’” (Conn 53).

9 The critical neglect of Pearl Buck is difficult to understand, particularly in view of the ongoing interest in popular fiction, in particular that by women, and in cultural diversity and Asian-American writing. Given Buck’s prominence and achievement, her exclusion from all three editions of The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985; 1996; 2007), as well as from other recent texts that trade in cross-cultural contact and global women’s issues, is both inexplicable and inexcusable.
Thus I grew up in a double world, the small white clean Presbyterian American world of my parents and the big loving merry not-too-clean Chinese world, and there was no communication between them. When I was in the Chinese world I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and behaved as a Chinese and ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between.  

(MSW 10)

In awarding Buck’s Prize for literature in 1938, the Nobel committee’s permanent secretary noted the remarkable strength of Buck’s biographies of her parents, Presbyterian missionaries in turn-of-the-century China. The biographies, Fighting Angel: Portrait of a Soul and The Exile, published in 1936, chronicle the different adjustments, often marked by gender, made by Buck’s parents to the foreign space they settled in and the people they lived among. Together these life stories are fascinating records of American “home making” beyond the confines of the national home.

Both biographies open with commentary on the “American” traits of each parent. The difference in each parent’s conception of this heritage is enormous: her father is described as being unmindful of his cultural origins; compelled by his mission, he assumes that he will fit in as a Chinese, and speaks, eats, travels and dresses accordingly. In his daughter’s perception, however, he is something of a ridiculous figure, conspicuously marked by his racial difference. Her mother, on the other hand, guards her separate, original cultural identity. As Buck says of her elsewhere,

Though she went to China when she was twenty-three and died there forty-one years later, she remained unchanged by any Chinese influence. She developed from within, as American as if she had remained in her native land. (Of Men and Women, 11)

In writing a separate biography for each parent, Buck grants each the dignity of an individual narrative. Her parents differ greatly in temperament, in their dedication to the mission, in their feelings for China and for America—and their perspectives never merge.

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This separation of her family’s intimate story into two versions is telling, as it reveals the oppositions Buck notes in her parents’ conception of gender roles, the value of work, national identification and the public-private divide.

These texts also reveal the dilemma inherent in bringing two radically different experiences and perspectives together in one space. Buck’s mother’s biography, titled *The Exile* (1936), is marked by a mood considerably more tragic and alienated and hopeless than her father’s, called *Fighting Angel: Portrait of a Soul* (1936). In China, Carie Sydenstricker felt herself removed from all she considered important, and suffered the distance from her American home as a trial and torment. In *The Exile*, Buck develops this sense of alienation into a commentary on issues of gender, power and national identity in the experience of adapting to life in an alien place.

*The Exile* opens with a description of the “American” traits of her mother, epitomized in the American garden Carie cultivates in China. Planting “American flowers there, wallflowers and bachelor’s buttons and hollyhocks” (*E* 2), Carie Sydenstricker creates a garden that is at once organic renewal, home-made art, a means of survival and defense against strangeness. Created out of what she knew and prized in far-away America, the garden signifies her deep ambivalence about the China mission, as well as her resistance to the difference that surrounds her. The plants form a living fortress that separates and protects her from China, a perimeter to guard and maintain American traditions in the heart of a dark cultural Otherness.

The first pages of *The Exile* are devoted to Carie’s childhood in America with parents who were themselves immigrants. America is for Carie an idyllic place, an immigrant’s dream, in prospect and retrospect. She weaves tales of her native land as a kind of fantasy park for her China-raised children, a sparkling world of open fields and clean water and wholesome ways and melodious sounds. Thus Buck grows up seeing America “spiritually” in maple sugar and snow, in fortifying legends of American heroism in the Civil War and elsewhere, through her mother’s stories (*E* 31).

In her portrait of her mother, Buck illuminates gendered differences in the formation of national identity. Buck’s mother constructs America for her children domestically, in her garden, furnishings, cooking and holiday celebrations, and in the annual packages of daily necessities ordered from
the Ward’s catalogue. Her mother makes her children into Americans by putting down roots—literally American roots. But the effort is entirely maternal: Buck’s father has little attachment to any place, save as a proving ground for his faith and his calling in bringing souls to his church.

Carie’s biography ends as it began, with reference to the force of her self-styled American identity. In old age she reiterates her commitment to the land whose memory is burnished in her imagination as myth:

I wish I had my life now to live over again, young and new. Do you know what I would do? I would go to New York and to those places where foreigners come into our gates, and I would spend my life telling them what America means and what they must do and be to make America. (E 209)

The power of narrative to foster national feeling is not lost on Buck: “Now that I have come to know for myself the country she loved so well, I see that indeed she was the very flower of it. Young in spirit to the end, indomitable [. . .] she was the very breath of America made flesh and spirit” (E 217-18).

Perhaps the greatest difference Buck notes between her parents is in their self-consciousness. Andrew is conscious only of his Work, suffering no self-knowledge; Carie is acutely self-conscious, and suffers for it. This gift of empathy allows her to understand the local people and care for them effectively, but also makes her more vulnerable. There is a great deal of pathos in Carie’s story; she witnesses unspeakable hardship and abuse among the Chinese, particularly of women and children. Her personal losses are staggering: four of her children die of disease. Buck writes that her mother’s response was to shield her remaining children from the emotional undertow she sensed in China, fearing they would be overwhelmed by a place “too beautiful and too sad, in its too abundant humanity and acceptance of suffering and passion” (E 77). Even the temple bell “with its deep, somber sadness and single, heartbreaking note” was hateful to her. “To her it spoke of all the shadow and mystery and darkness of the Oriental life about her, and mystery and darkness she hated” (E 17).

Unlike her husband, whose long career in China reinforced him in his mission and finally estranged him completely from his native America, Carie’s time “in exile” strengthened her sense of national identity. Her story demonstrates how, as Susan Stanford Friedman puts it, “Identity often
requires some form of displacement—literal or figurative—to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of ‘home,’ the perception of its identity as distinct from elsewhere” (151).

Buck’s biography of her mother opens discussion of challenges that beset Western outsiders desiring full immersion in a place like China, including intransigent facts of temperament and upbringing that may render some unsuitable for certain environments. Buck’s father, Absalom Sydenstricker, called Andrew in *Fighting Angel: Portrait of a Soul* (1936), springs from an entirely different American tradition than that of Carie’s family. Where Carie was raised in the cocoon of a comfortable, pleasure-loving Dutch mercantile clan, Andrew exhibits the isolated and self-righteous nature of the Puritan, a kind of Ahab of the spirit who presses forward with his vision against all opposition. In his desire to be effective in his mission among the Chinese, her father, a tall fair red-haired son of West Virginia, attempts to go native in his dress, eating habits, speech, and traveling style. But Buck observes that her father never really does fit in; beneath the Chinese robes, he is unable to remake himself at a fundamental level: “No one could possibly mistake him” for anything but an American, an outsider (*FA* 1).

As Andrew lacks self-consciousness, he is likewise hardly aware of the others in his intimate environment. Buck remarks that this lack of self-consciousness was likely the key to her father’s success in China at work that could be undertaken only by a single-minded, intrepid, absolutely unflappable soul. But Andrew’s daughter sees it also as indicative of his personal failure: “Andrew never touched the fringe of human life, he never knew its stuff, he never felt its doubt nor shared its pain” (*FA* 197).

Pearl Buck hints that this general lack of social awareness, coupled with a blinding sense of righteousness, were peculiarly American traits: “No country but America could have produced him exactly as he was” (*FA* 3). Buck maintains that the missionary impulse is an American habit; her father and his American colleagues in China were a quixotic, often well-meaning, brave and determined lot who could also be arrogant, misguided and blinded by personal ambitions and psychological weaknesses. As John d’Entremont remarks, “Male missionaries were in China to fulfill their own needs [. . .] Men were stunted by being all self; women by being all duty” (48).
In certain powerful respects, Buck’s father displays a potential for
cultural hybridity in the combination of his American heritage with his
pronounced attitude of respect and reverence for China. “China was his
heart’s home,” writes his daughter. “When Andrew’s feet touched Chinese
soil, he changed” (FA 154, 74). Buck says that Andrew “always took sides
with the Chinese” (FA 143), considering them morally superior to the
Westerners. But Andrew’s bias for the Chinese rendered him an incompetent
judge of character, unable to detect corruption among his Chinese flock.
Andrew’s uncompromising attitude toward his mission and adopted land is
reflected in Buck’s own fiction both as strength and weakness. Her
commitment to depicting the Chinese reality as she saw it charges her
narrative with its singular power. But like her father, Buck at times displays
an exclusive and narrow vision, not unlike the “utter single-heartedness” that
bound her father to his calling (Woods 3).

Together these biographies describe the heritage and influences that
contribute to Buck’s formation as a citizen of two worlds and a multicultural
artist. She is the meeting point of two sensibilities, a third point of view
between her parents, who are estranged both from the homeland they knew
and from each other. Thus Buck serves as mediator between two sides of her
origin, male and female, and also between the two sides of her cultural
identification, American and Chinese.

But in these biographies the “twain” do not meet. Buck’s parents’
ideals, sense of purpose and perspectives on China and on America never
coincide. Likewise each is essentially separated from China, never mingling
properly or wholeheartedly, either from reluctance or lack of human
awareness. Husband and wife remain separated even in death: Andrew is
buried on a mountaintop, with “nothing between that spot and the sky—no
tree, no human habitation” (FA 197), while Carie “lies in a parcel of ground
walled about in the heart of a Chinese city” (FA 197). They live on in
separate biographies.

In this effort at memorializing their lives, Buck demonstrates her own
hybrid nature, formed as she was of essentially unlike matter, in her parents
and in the dissimilar cultures she was nurtured by. In the biographies, she
attempts to join these aspects of her incomplete parents; as the child of two
vastly unlike temperaments, she emerges as culturally “bifocal” as regards
China and America. Like her mother she responds intuitively to the magic of
narrative and myth that makes all places susceptible to art, and equally unreal—America included. Unlike her mother, she can look on China and not shudder. Like her father, she recognizes a true aristocracy of the spirit, the high pure calling that she is both drawn to and repelled by, particularly when it degenerates into fanaticism. But unlike her father, she is self-conscious and sensitive, able to see clearly and judge dispassionately, her vision clear of the spell of religion.

The inherent difficulties of translating a culturally hybrid sensibility into art are demonstrated in her most celebrated work, *The Good Earth* (1931). In this novel, Buck reveals a China few Westerners knew existed, with starkly unsentimental, uncharming, raw, often harsh depictions of life among various social classes. It is not the exotic marketplace that Marco Polo saw; not the vast field of souls ripe for conversion that awaited the Jesuit Matteo Ricci and his successors; not the object lesson in manners, morals or aesthetics important to Oliver Goldsmith and later writers like Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound. Buck’s image of China was new as well for the Chinese themselves: The hero-bandits, doomed aristocratic lovers and warrior kings of the great Chinese classics give way here to common farmers, lowest among the Chinese social classes.

This singularly powerful vision of “real” China is achieved at a certain cost, namely the exclusion of any foreign material. The result is an airtight portrait of an exclusive, homogeneous society. In *The Good Earth*, Buck establishes a new home in fiction for a place rarely seen clearly in Western writing, but this “Chinese” China is irreducibly alien to the West. Buck’s textual China is achieved by means of a perspective that is not comparative, but native and local in plot, style and sensibility (including diction and syntax), and moral focus.

*The Good Earth* contains numerous colloquial expressions that are molded directly from the Chinese. Early on, the farmer Wang Lung says of his father, “That old head thinks of nothing except his eating and his drinking” (*TGE* 5). In this line Buck uses the verbatim translation of the expression “old head” or *lau tou*, which conveys some annoyance in Chinese. In another example, Wang Lung’s old father comments that for a poor man, drinking “tea is like eating silver” (*TGE* 3), another colloquial expression translated verbatim. As Wang Lung is contemplating moving south during the famine, he hears a rumor that he might travel by “firewagon,” or train, a
machine Wang Lung had never actually seen, being so busy with his farm. “Firewagon” is a direct translation of the Chinese characters for train (huo che), still used in contemporary Chinese, and evocatively expressive of the fundamental nature of the machine.

Buck’s sentence structures are modeled on Chinese patterns as well, furthering her goal of imitating how her characters really speak and demonstrating respect for the descriptive power of the Chinese language. The result is not pidgin English, although it can sound “foreign” and awkward, as in the following examples:

“If you have any food left, for a good heart’s sake give me a handful to save the life of the other of my sons, and I will forget that I saw you in my house as a robber” (TGE 56). This is the direct translation of the Chinese sentence pattern “to save the life of other-my-son,” rather than the standard English “to save the life of my other son” and “I saw you robbing my house.”

Buck’s literal translations of Chinese do not always result in a finely wrought English. When Wang Lung is asked by his good-for-nothing uncle for food, he responds, “It is cutting my flesh out to give to him and for nothing except that we are of a blood” (TGE 46). When my Chinese students in the National Taiwan Normal University English department read The Good Earth, they agree that much of the dialogue translates very easily back into Chinese. But they also occasionally wonder aloud if Pearl Buck knew English very well. I believe that what Buck gains by rendering dialogue in the authentic rhythm and patterns of Mandarin Chinese is a closer approximation of the pace of life in China.

In The Good Earth, Buck finds a new way of being in China, and of “using” China as an aesthetic resource. The commonness of her Chinese characters “as they really are [. . .] common with the good commonness of everyday things, lusty, hardy, quarrelsome, alive” (Buck, “China and the Foreign Chinese,” 539) presents a great contrast to the Oriental-themed work of her contemporaries Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound. Early reviewers of the novel applauded its unpretentious style: “Pearl Buck’s China is ‘unfamiliar’ because it is not exotic [. . .] there is little in her book of mystery, exoticism, of the quality we call Oriental” (Rev., The Good Earth, NYT Book Review, 6).

In addition to the omission of Orientalist paraphernalia—the silken veils and fans and mists—Buck also eliminates from her tale Western
standards for social interaction, moral edification, national consciousness, the uplifting resolution. Conspicuously absent from the novel, for one example, is the national identity of this good earth. China in *The Good Earth* is not called China; this word appears but twice in the novel, and then in peculiarly alienating situations in a strange city. Upon hearing the word China shouted by a young revolutionary on a street corner, Wang Lung appears confused, not comprehending the reference. As the novel is written entirely from an uneducated farmer’s perspective, the effect of this lack of name-references is to make the narrative more deeply realistic, rooted in place, and thus irreducibly alien to an outsider. As one reviewer wrote, “Pearl Buck never names names or places, but this does not injure the narrative, as her concern is to record the inner lives of people” (“Mrs. Buck Concludes,” *NYT Book Review*, 3).

Throughout the novel, Buck acknowledges respect for the Chinese earth and its legendary hold over its people. The characters never stray far from their literal substance without dire consequences. A ritual bond fixes the relationship between the Chinese characters and the land, as the novel opens with Wang Lung paying his respects to the earth gods as he goes to take a wife. Buck thus invests the relationship between human beings and the earth they tend with a value that encompasses heaven and history. The landscape in *The Good Earth* is an emotional and affective space: the reader cannot be certain what crops Buck’s characters grow, only that the land grows them; generations are nurtured by its spiritual balm as well as material sustenance.

In Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and other American novels of the period that deal in agrarian themes and economic struggle, the land is primarily backdrop against which the characters’ social relations and personal ambitions play out. But in *The Good Earth*, the land has primary importance; the human population and all its deeds and concerns are secondary. The novel begins by rising from the earth, as the protagonist rises in his fortunes and expectations; the earth remains a pivotal focus for the protagonist, who after being driven away from his farm by famine, makes every effort to return to it. The economy rises and falls, the warring hordes tramp from one end of the land to another as revolutionary passions rise and fall—all these demonstrations of human will and striving are presented as merely cyclical and ephemeral events. The land alone remains a constant.
Charles Hayford suggests that *The Good Earth* appealed to Americans for its “reassuring rags-to-riches success story vaunting hard work, individualism, and other apple pie virtues,” making Wang Lung a kind of “Chinese Horatio Alger” (23). But Buck seems under no compulsion to borrow from either Western narrative standards or social values, with the result a more purely Chinese situation, irreducible in its monocultural vision.

In keeping with its limited local point of view, *The Good Earth* contains very few foreign characters, and those that appear are on the scene only briefly, leaving no lasting impression on the Chinese characters. After fleeing to a great city in time of famine, Wang Lung encounters a Westerner for the first time, someone “more foreign yet than he in this city” (*TGE* 77). The foreigner gives Wang Lung a paper with a picture “of a man, white-skinned, who hung upon a crosspiece of wood [. . .]. Wang Lung looked at the pictured man in horror and with increasing interest.” When he takes the paper home and shows it to his mystified family, his old father remarks: “Surely this was a very evil man to be thus hung.” Later, O-lan recycles the paper, sewing it “into a shoe sole” (*TGE* 89).

There is an echo of this event in Homi Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man,” in a description of how “the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse [. . .] and the holiest of books—the Bible—bearing both the standard of the cross and the standard of empire finds itself strangely dismembered.” Bhabha quotes a missionary in Bengal writing in 1817:

> still everyone would gladly receive a Bible. And why? —that he may lay it up as a curiosity for a few pice; or use it for waste paper. Such it is well known has been the common fate of these copies of the Bible. (92)

Buck suggests that the foreigners in *The Good Earth* are in the “wrong” place, even as Wang Lung is in the “wrong” place, torn from his land, in the unnamed city in the south. Not only are the foreigners and the pictures of Jesus alien to Wang Lung; he is also confused by nationalist-minded Chinese. In the city a young Chinese revolutionary harangues a crowd, saying “China must have a revolution and must rise against the hated foreigners. Wang Lung was alarmed and slunk away, feeling that he was the foreigner against whom the young man spoke with such passion” (*TGE* 76).
The marginalization of foreigners and foreign influences here is startling; so too is Buck’s narrative perspective on the female characters in *The Good Earth*. Women are not sentimentalized in the novel, nor championed, nor made to bear the standard of cultural ideals. The treatment and mistreatment of Wang Lung’s wife O-lan, as well as harsh reflections by Wang Lung on her unattractiveness even after all the service she has rendered him, are presented without comment, reminder of what it is to live in a world where boys are everything and girls are little better than slaves, often victims of infanticide (*TGE* 186).

In keeping with Chinese narrative style, there is no grand conclusion to the novel; “sometimes it merely stops, in the way life does,” as Buck said of the lack of a recognizable conclusion in many Chinese novels (*The Chinese Novel*, 55). But it ends as it began, in earth, the common denominator in the rise or fall of a family. Comparison with an American land novel of the period is instructive: at the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the reader is treated to moral uplift in Rose of Sharon’s act of mercy toward a dying man, and in Tom Joad’s passionate determination to work for the collective good. Where Steinbeck’s characters strive to overcome the slings and arrows of nature with good deeds and humanity, characters in *The Good Earth* act in response to demands more primal than moral.

The value system in *The Good Earth* is not likely one a Westerner easily accepts. There is no injunction to behave well or treat others decently or even try to learn some lesson about life; there is little but a primal concentration on the land, which is no landscape in which to tarry and meditate but rather a kind of incubator for its human children. Neither is *The Good Earth* a place that outsiders can occupy, cut off as it is from contact with the greater world. I believe that this strict focus is necessary for the development of Buck’s vision of China, but the result is that most Western readers, having no experience in China, are forced to observe from a distance and likely not with understanding.

Pearl Buck’s work is a living text in which are displayed all the potential advantages as well as the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural encounters. Like her parents she has a keen understanding of two different cultures, but the hybrid quality of her own mind does not translate into her work, in which she swings East or West depending on her perception of the narrative’s requirements. This “failure” is exemplary, I think, as it points to
challenges in cultural comparison and patterns of dominance in the “contact zones” of fiction and real life. But rather than paralyzing future discussion of Buck’s work, such criticism can be productive. She must be read as one of the better attempts we have in our literature to come to terms with two enormously different cultural systems. In striving to create a home in fiction to accommodate both, Pearl Buck produced work that is both disconcerting and invigorating in its challenge to all of us to read, and live, “other-wise.”

Gertrude Stein on the Home Front

Different challenges entirely figured in the career of Gertrude Stein, the American writer who established a home in France in the early years of the 20th century. Stein, mentor and hostess to the generation of writers and artists dubbed “lost,” was herself not lost at all.11 In 1903, after dropping out of medical school at Johns Hopkins and following older brother Leo to Paris, Stein quickly seemed to discover just where she belonged. She would live in Europe, primarily France, for the rest of her life, making only short visits to her native land.

Stein appears to have been quite programmatic in choosing where to relocate. She decided in her twenties to follow her older brother Leo to Paris, where they established a household together and soon began to collect art and artists. Paris was just the right distance from the stifling social milieu of America, neither close nor too far away; it had moreover the advantage of being the hub of contemporary art movements, with substantial resources for intellectual and aesthetic development. Paris also offered a more congenial atmosphere for cultivating relationships—including homosexual partnerships—and there was a thriving lesbian-friendly salon culture that would have been heavily censured in America of the period12.

Stein also came to realize that she preferred to live in a place where people didn’t use English in daily life. The French environment provided a soothing “white noise” which she could easily ignore, allowing her to

11 As Hemingway tells it: “Gertrude Stein spoke of a remark made by a garage owner to one of his young mechanics. ‘All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation’” (29).

12 There is a thorough discussion of the social and sexual freedoms available to the expatriate woman in Paris in Shari Benstock’s Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940 (London: Virago, 1987); see in particular chapters on Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, Stein, Toklas and Mina Loy.
concentrate on the deeper, presumably noisier life of her mind in which she was free to play games with her own language without interruption.

Like Pearl Buck, Stein was conscious that she was a product of “two worlds,” having put down American roots in the socially and intellectually more congenial soil of France. What grew was a home that became both stage and spectacle: a salon in which she enjoyed the company of the celebrities of the art world, and a cherished domestic space that she shared with longtime companion Alice B. Toklas. Home for Gertrude Stein was thus the intersection of theory and domestic daily practice, a comforting sphere in which she could cultivate the habits that provided a secure foundation for her unconventional projects. Her unique style of homemaking—in her salon, as well as in her works—shows a development in texts from different moments in her career, from the guarded interiors of *Tender Buttons* to the more broadly social sensibility of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Over time Stein’s treatment of home—as domestic space and social context—becomes broader, more flexible and more deeply felt.

“The author of all that is in there behind the door”: The Inner Sanctum of *Tender Buttons*

An early work in which domestic arrangements figure importantly is Stein’s prose poem *Tender Buttons* (1914). Written in the period after Alice B. Toklas had moved into the Steins’ Paris household, when Gertrude’s brother and longtime companion Leo was on his way out, *Tender Buttons* may indeed reflect a moment of domestic transition, even crisis, in Stein’s life (Murphy 384). The brother-sister relationship was complicated, according to Stein biographer Richard Bridgman and other observers, by jealousies and abuse of power: “although [Leo Stein] served as her protector and brought her to the leading edge of modern art, [he] withered her self-esteem with his neurotic condescension” (Bridgman 346). Thus Gertrude was in this period free for the first time of the daily presence of her brother. His place would be filled by the trusted and beloved Alice, who assumed the management of both secretarial and household duties.

Stein’s commentators have often framed remarks about her work in domestic terms. William Gass, in the kitchen, maintained that under her command, “Words can be moved about like furniture; they can be diced like carrots” (146). Hugh Kenner, out in the toolshed, observed that “Miss Stein
made paragraphs out of die-cut parts. . . [her paragraph] lies on the page, a rectangular perfection, elements cycling and thrusting like connecting rods. It might be a detail in a design for a prose locomotive” (121-22).

Indeed Stein seemed to occupy language the way other people occupy space; words had physical dimensions and properties for her, like the cherished furnishings of her homes. But in Tender Buttons it seems that the converse is also true: Stein manages to occupy space the way she occupied language. Here geography and domestic settings provide subject matter, linguistic codes, games, concepts to manipulate, observe and display. Here space can be rearranged verbally, according to mood, humor, company and affections.

Stein’s spatio-linguistic arrangements are idiosyncratic and highly eccentric. Outsiders, readers, we stand at the periphery peering in at the well-defended inner sanctum of Tender Buttons; its baffling arrangement and queer diction bar entry. Those readers who do not throw up their hands and shuffle off need to work their way in, searching for a key, or password, to gain entrance.

Michael Edward Kaufmann says that “Tender Buttons is a narrative of naming—a narrative with no plot, character or action in the conventional sense; simply a narrative of the mind encountering language and print” (450). But what sort of objects are being named and carefully, if cryptically, considered? From the outside more than anything Tender Buttons seems a portrait of “interiors,” hermetic, an internalized domestic scene, its “portraits” of Objects, Food and Rooms drawn in an intensely private language. Each of the first two sections is composed of lists, resembling a housewife’s list of ingredients or “shorthand style of recipes” in their “paratactic style” (Murphy 391).

Stein seizes on elements of ordinary daily life that are taken for granted, often beneath notice: “A Substance in a Cushion”; “A Box”; “A Cloth”; “A Seltzer Bottle”; in short, “Nothing Elegant.” Amid the odds and ends however even the casual observer will note a curious absence. Where are the people? Who lives here, who runs this household, who collects and uses these objects? Who follows the recipes, plans the menus? Who visits? Are the residents missing, or somehow embedded in the home, hidden from view? In the second section on Food, we have lists of dishes, recipes, reflections on eating. But there is no cook or host or guest in plain sight.
Even the language works to create an “impersonal” environment in this home, as “first person pronouns rarely appear” (Murphy 389).

Looking ahead to a work like the Autobiography that made Stein famous, it is remarkable that Tender Buttons lacks reference to a social milieu, to places and larger spaces beyond the home: neighborhood, city, nation, geography. Neither do social categories—familial, ethnic, national, religious—play a role here. Nor are there clear references to any sort of occupation outside the household industry and domestic concerns of cooking, dining, cleaning surfaces, cleaning clothes.

Indeed Tender Buttons is a little world unto itself, carefully kept from the great world. Here we have arrived at the center of a private place, the inner sanctum of the home. The “portraits” here are preoccupied with interiors, cataloguing objects that properly nest within other things, or contain them: stuff in cushions, boxes, what’s in a carafe or a seltzer bottle, what’s under a petticoat. Items of Food and Objects, can be “consumed” or used; space and objects and inhabitants are together finally enclosed by Rooms.

OBJECTS.
Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the center makes two one side.
If the elbow is long and it is filled so then the best example is all together.
The kind of show is made by squeezing. (TB, “Objects” 11)

As if to rivet attention on the domestic core, images of tables and “centers” recur in each section. The center of the table is the heart of this home, the site of intimate exchanges of conversation and nourishment. Home radiates from this “necessary place,” where people sit around a table eating together. Starting at this center Stein gets her house in order, gradually moving out to fill the room with fellowship and the security of “a whole steadiness,” as she says.

A TABLE.
A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. Is it likely that a change.
A table means more than a glass even a looking glass is tall. A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little
thing it means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake. (*TB*, “Objects” 15)

A CENTRE IN A TABLE.
It was a way a day, this made some sum.
[. . . .]
Next to me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a folder some waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with her for less. (*TB*, “Food” 39)

Marguerite Murphy suggests that this “revision” or “new arrangement” reflects changes in Stein’s domestic milieu, with Alice moving to the center (“next to me”) and Leo retreating to the periphery of Stein’s life: “Stein’s prose combines gestures of polite discourse with various ‘statements’ to defend a new arrangement around this table” (400). The domestic rearrangements continue throughout *Tender Buttons*, with unseen inhabitants expanding the physical and affective area of their living space and concerns beyond the safety of the center and the comforts of the table.

In “Rooms,” there is movement away from the center, away from the individual and particular. The second section on “Food” ends with “the center of the table”; the third section, “Rooms,” opens with an order to “act so there is no use in a center” (*TB*, “Rooms” 43). If the source at the center has been solidly established, filled with Objects and Food and feeling, possession and even identity radiate outward, filling the room. Indeed the “key” to the castle itself is hidden within: “the author of all that is in there behind the door [. . .] explaining darkening and expecting relating”:

ROOMS:
If the center has the place then there is distribution. That is natural. There is a contradiction and naturally returning there comes to be both sides and the center. That can be seen from the description.

The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning. Explaining darkening and expecting relating is all of a piece. (*TB*, “Rooms” 43)

If the residents here are invisible or hidden, their desires, passions, troubles, sorrows, fears are nevertheless palpably present. *Tender Buttons* is noisy with voices, sometimes laughing or teasing, sometimes heavy with
worry and embarrassment. Consider for example the emotional tension in this portrait of an “Object”:

A TIME TO EAT.

A pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised and educated and resumed and articulate separation. This is not tardy.

(TB, “Objects” 13)

In this portrait, the tone changes midway in the sentence. At first adjectives are placed side by side without commas, tripping along easily. Then the beat becomes ponderous and slow, the separation of words emphasized with the conjunction “and.” This change begins at the word “tyrannical.” The sentence seems to read, “We all have to eat, it’s a simple habit that is necessarily repeated to maintain the vitality of the organism, and that in itself is a pleasant matter. However in certain places and for certain personalities there is a formula for meals and mealtimes, rules that must be followed. Under the constraint of these rules, a simple meal becomes chore and obligation, no longer simply a pleasurable event.” The second group of adjectives thus plods along in heavy, mechanical, formal emphasis, seeming to indicate that the effort to follow those dining rules is as onerous as the effort required to utter all those words, and utter them distinctly. They must be chewed on, pondered. And one must not be late for such a meal.

Here as elsewhere in Tender Buttons, human agency is veiled. Who gives commands; who takes them? Who is present at the table, and what do they all mean to each other? It is a sentence, and an event, redolent of heavy Victorian table rituals, presided over by father—or brother, even, reminding of the perhaps “tyrannical and authorized and educated” presence of Leo Stein.

In the same way we can consider the following “Objects” as fraught with tension, drama, social and likely sexual import; by turns provocative and alarmed. The characters involved here are apparently spirited female intimates. But dialogue and identity is as usual heavily veiled, hidden in puns and contexts fraught with private sexual references. Many observers discern here a lesbian erotics, starting with the title; Marjorie Perloff points out that “In French, boutons tendres means nipples as well as buds” (145). The following passages are particularly suggestive of sexual situations, as in:
A LITTLE CALLED PAULINE.
I hope she has her cow. Bidding a wedding, widening received treading, little leading mention nothing.
Cough out cough out in the leather and really feather it is not for. Please could, please could, jam it not plus more sit in when. (TB, “Objects” 15)

SUPPOSE AN EYES.
Suppose it is within a gate which open is open at the house of closing summer that is to say it is so.
[].
Go red go red, laugh white.
Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get. (TB, “Objects” 16)

THIS IS THIS DRESS, AIDER.
Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, mucher moochers.
A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let. (TB, “Objects” 17)

In all three passages there is an urgency of feeling and erotic resonances: biographer Richard Bridgman and other readers have noted that Stein often used “cows” to represent parts of the body and sexual acts (152). “Cough out, cough out” and “please could, please could” produce an urgent pleading; “Go red go red, laugh white” is both about being “gored” and about being embarrassed. William Gass reads “Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get” as “a line which explodes, upon the gentlest inspection, into a dozen sexual pieces” (158).

“Aider” is often read as a form of Ada, Alice B. Toklas’s nickname (Bridgman 93). Catherine Stimpson comments on erotic undertones in “This is this dress, aider”:

the meditation replicates the rhythms of an act that seems at once richly pleasurable and violent. Stein was to become more skillful in imitating the rhythms of an act in order to name it without resorting to, and consorting with, jaded old nouns.” (75)
Domestic space here is a secret retreat for its occupants, enclosing intensely personal acts and emotions; meaning itself is wrapped in a private and idiosyncratic language. Stein seems conscious as well of the efforts of outsiders to discover what is within: efforts that she would frustrate, perhaps, with code. Perhaps the curtain is drawn to conceal an erotic scene; perhaps Stein is not quite ready for an open house. At center in the domestic core, a chaos of feelings; what is visible is perhaps only “surface, suggestion and silence,” as described in the first item on the Food menu,

ROASTBEEF:
Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is silence there is silence and every time that is languid there is that there then and not oftener, not always, not particular, tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the shine and the succor and the white and the same and the better and the red and the same and the center and the yellow and the tender and the better, and together. (TB, “Food” 21)

This home is thus something more than the sum of its surfaces; even a well-run home may conceal extreme agitation and the potential for startling changes behind its façade. The visitor notices the shine and surface, suggestive of vital activity, but is unlikely to be aware of what efforts sustain it, or what energies circulate beneath the surface.

As an early depiction of Stein’s “home-making,” Tender Buttons is stocked with the furniture of the interior. Much takes place within these walls, that much is clear; but the sounds are indistinct, the shapes are silhouettes only or fragments of larger shapes, the shutters are drawn.

Home as Stage and Spectacle: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

“The room was soon very very full and who were they all.” (AABT 13)

Nearly twenty years later, in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), we finally meet the neighbors. A motley crowd they are too, all shapes and hues and accents and shades of talent, moving singly and in great shimmering flocks through the house at 27 rue de Fleurus. The most
privileged among them are granted a moment in the sun of Gertrude and “Alice’s” attention, to mixed advantage.

The home on display in the *Autobiography* is quite unlike the oblique and guarded space of *Tender Buttons*. In its chatty observations about domestic matters and daily life, and most significantly in its inclusion of the larger world—urban society, the spectacle of art and international culture—the home space of the *Autobiography* seems warmly accessible, almost relentlessly inviting, the antithesis of the intensely private world of *Tender Buttons*.

I see this text representing a moment in Stein’s expatriate career marked by greater accommodation of the community in which she lived, resulting in a textual home-space that encompasses both public image and private vision more completely than *Tender Buttons* did. The *Autobiography* as text is likewise more accommodating, strolling the reader through a narrative that is comfortably ensconced in time and place, and voiced in a clear flat conversational tone. As if in reward for this new interest in reaching out to readers, the work was a best seller, an event deemed newsworthy enough to result in this headline: “Gertrude Stein Writes a Book in Simple Style.”

In the *Autobiography* as in *Tender Buttons*, Stein tosses the domestic and private and quotidienne together with the public and the avant-garde, but this time in rather different proportions. Her home has by now expanded into a semi-public space, a salon and an exhibition room. The rooms are filling up with paintings and the people who come to look at them. On display in the *Autobiography* and in her home are not only the great modern paintings she had begun collecting with her brother, but also the homely habits and domestic arrangements of the great artists themselves.

However, despite the apparent openness of the *Autobiography*, I believe that here Stein continues to maintain a careful distance from her subjects. The home space in the *Autobiography* is a stage, a museum, a theater, with all the dining and visiting and housekeeping and gossiping calculated to enhance that performance. Relationships too seem carefully stage-managed, with Alice assigned the part of wife and wife-sitter, foil to

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13 Headline for a review by Fanny Butler in the 2 Sept. 1933 Books section of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, quoted in Davis (18).
Stein’s head of household enthroned in center court with the men and men of genius.

The “divided” nature of the Stein-Toklas household is evident in its dual role as private home and salon. More than private living quarters, the Paris address was also a staging ground for daring new ideas and the cultivation of an aesthetic and intellectual elite, a museum or zoo of the new. These public functions expanded the notion of home for Stein from the fiercely defended retreat it is in *Tender Buttons*. Indeed the physical house itself had two separate personalities, with the living quarters separate from the atelier, where the paintings were hung and visitors entertained:

The home at 27 rue de Fleurus consisted then as it does now of a tiny pavillon of two stories with four small rooms, a kitchen and bath, and a very large atelier adjoining. Now the atelier is attached to the pavillon by a tiny hall passage added in 1914 but at that time the atelier had its own entrance. (*AABT* 7)

A salon is neither wholly private nor fully public, as Bruce Burgett points out in asking “is a salon a home?” (440). If home is conceived of as self-contained and private, shut to the world, a salon on the other hand requires contact with the great world and outside influences to be successful. Indeed its success is measured in the spectacle it offers, as stage and temple of the elite. In her depiction of daily life at 27 rue de Fleurus, Stein manages to maintain both private and public functions simultaneously, although in comparison with the guarded interiors of *Tender Buttons*, the public mode is emphasized in the later work.

As with any public space, the Stein-Toklas household had its rules, its hours. The tradition was that people came on Saturday night, and were required to produce a personal invitation. Such rules stabilize, regularize and distance subject from object, the scene from the visitors:

the usual formula was, de la part de qui venez-vous, who is your introducer. The idea was that anybody could come but for form’s sake and in Paris you have to have a formula, everybody was supposed to be able to mention the name of somebody who had told them about it. (*AABT* 13)

In her catalogue of the procession of visitors to the salon, the prominent, the gifted and the obscure, Stein encourages a cult of celebrity, apparently aware,
as Sara Blair points out, that home could be “a staging place of social dramas of identity” (419).

Visitors came to see the pictures Stein collected, strange new work that amused and gratified and fascinated but also often shocked and disoriented the guests. This home space, neither wholly private nor entirely public, was at once inviting and frightening, a kind of intellectual fun house that cast a spell equal parts attraction and horror. As “Alice” says of first observing the paintings: “The pictures were so strange that one quite instinctively looked at anything rather than at them just at first” (AABT 9). Stein seemed conscious of this effect and used the paintings and furnishings of her atelier to cultivate “disorientation” in her seating arrangements, in part to flatter guests but also apparently for her own amusement. Matisse noticed that she placed guests in seats opposite their own pictures so that she might observe their reactions:

yes I know Mademoiselle Gertrude, the world is a theatre for you, but there are theatres and theatres, and when you listen so carefully to me and so attentively and do not hear a word I say then I do say that you are very wicked. (AABT 15)

The home in the Autobiography cannot be called a “comfortable” place, not in the pictures or their placement, nor in the furniture, nor in the breakable bric-a-brac Stein liked to collect. A brilliantly calculated arrangement, the result is a rather perilous space in which one needs to watch one’s elbows. And mind one’s manners as well, because reputations are also breakable. Once on Stein’s home turf guests were scrutinized and occasionally severely evaluated, particularly in their domestic behavior. Among other faux pas Ezra Pound fell out of Stein’s “favorite little armchair.” It was apparently the final straw, as he swiftly fell from favor with Stein as well; she was “furious” and did “not want to see Ezra again” (AABT 202).

Stein seemed to value formal display and aesthetic impact above comfort even for herself. How like a queen she sat on the big uncomfortable antique chair in the main room, as “Alice” observes:

The chairs in the room were also all Italian renaissance, not very comfortable for short-legged people and one got the habit of sitting on one’s legs. Miss Stein sat near the stove in a lovely high-backed one and she peacefully let her legs hang, which was
a matter of habit, and when any one of the many visitors came to ask her a question she lifted herself up out of this chair and usually replied in French, not just now. (*AABT* 9)

Stein’s ability to tolerate discomfort in the interest of aesthetic value seems necessary for the kind of “art” that her home was, not so much a place to make oneself at home as one in which to be dazzled, challenged, amazed.

Stein’s public interests expand in the *Autobiography* to a consideration of nationality and “national traits,” presented as features to be styled and performed. Stein is well cast in her own national role: American, male, and martial. As “Alice” says, “I did not realize then how completely and entirely American was Gertrude Stein. Later I often teased her, calling her a general, a civil war general of either or both sides” (*AABT* 16). The same stylized depiction of nationality is applied to others in her circle; as Davis points out, there is an “emphasis in the *Autobiography* on the role national identity plays in personal relationships and art” (30). Using her friend Picasso as a model, Stein asserts that Americans and Spaniards are alike in being “abstract and cruel” (*AABT* 91). Picasso himself tries on an American identity, styling his hair like a Civil War president’s: “Do you think that I really do look like your president Lincoln” he asks Alice. “Gertrude showed me a photograph of him and I have been trying to arrange my hair to look like his” (*AABT* 15-16).

The conscious artifice of the home in the *Autobiography* is highlighted by a curious reference to Robinson Crusoe in the last paragraph. Here the brilliant device of the work is revealed: this autobiography is not an autobiography at all, as its ghost writer cheerfully confesses. “Alice” quotes Stein as telling her,

> It does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (*AABT* 252)

The *Autobiography* has seemed a relentlessly social book, outgoing and welcoming. But this comparison to Defoe’s radically isolated character forces a reconsideration of the context and purpose of Stein’s work. Robinson Crusoe is exiled from his native place, isolated for years on a desert island where he must fashion for himself a home. Crusoe is up to the
task; glorying in lists and materials and projects and deadlines, he remakes his island estate in the image of the home he left, in its domestic function and amenities, and in its strong defenses as well.

Once his walls are in place, Robinson Crusoe sets about erecting a familiar social pattern as well. Crusoe is lord of his estate; his first subjects are animals, birds and goats. Other people who happen his way are potential threats, invaders, in particular the cannibal tribes who use “his” beach for their grisly rituals. Crusoe’s one significant relationship in the novel is with Friday, the native he rescues who becomes his servant and dependent.

The similarities are obvious: Stein is a cultural exile in France, where circumstances free her to be “alone” with her language, allowing her to develop a singular identity and work more productively. As Nicole Bracker remarks on Stein’s “linguistic isolation” in Paris, “individuality for Stein took the form of coincidence of language with oneself, of ‘being all alone with my English and myself’” (138). The home Stein displays in the Autobiography is well defended; she determines who enters, and she oversees and judges conduct within its borders. Stein allows one intimate in Alice, factotum, subordinate, as Crusoe took in Friday. Stein’s home like Crusoe’s is self-made; like Crusoe, Stein doesn’t blend into the surroundings; rather, she dominates, manipulates, controls. She stands out, stands apart—even as de facto principal in someone else’s autobiography.

Robinson Crusoe is the prototypical domestic alien for Stein, homo economicus and conqueror of a strange place. Stein uses Crusoe’s domestic success in exile as the organizing principle of her work. Stein and Toklas are island dwellers in their salon-home; like Robinson Crusoe, they are acutely aware of the perimeters, and guard their domain closely. While the Autobiography is apparently much more open and inviting than Tender Buttons, it is in some ways similarly hermetic. Even as she deflects attention from herself by speaking through “Alice,” Stein highlights the social whirl and spectacle of her salon as a way of shifting attention away from the vulnerable private quarters. The reader is a guest at a performance.

In this achievement Stein sought to bring into balance diverse facets of her life and art. Her home was an interactive project, encompassing both intensely personal factors and her public persona. In her years as an expatriate in France, Stein demonstrated the possibility of becoming part of a foreign culture in a new way, at once immersing herself in the “foreign
domestic” scene while striving to maintain a productive cultural and critical objectivity. As self-conscious and self-determined artist and critic, this “most programmatic” of expatriates, as Hugh Kenner called her (122), settled into a life style that squared with the intellectual and aesthetic convictions she would postulate in lectures, memoirs and experimental writing.

Stein’s and Buck’s endeavors to establish textual homes away from home stand in interesting comparison to each other. Where Stein’s homemaking seems fundamentally personal and egocentric, focused on the requirements of her own aesthetic development, Buck sought rather to resolve differences and close gaps between cultures. For Buck, the primary task was not personal but social and cultural; ever before her was the great task of aligning planets East and West, entities which seemed more tolerant of distance than proximity. Between the two, Buck was the matchmaker, pulling the intractable parties closer to each other but never quite arriving at the middle. In contrast to Buck, however, who seemed stoic in her determination to bring her two worlds together, Stein was apparently happy to keep them at a distance from each other. She was an American; her hometown was France: the paradox was for Stein productive rather than disorienting, as she sought out, cultivated—even reveled in—the experience of dislocation and disjunction, well-known features of her verbal experiments.

Homemaking has been an American obsession since the first settlers risked life and fortune for new-world real estate. In the American context, home, as place or condition, is often created in writing. But where most Americans are busy accommodating themselves to domestic life in their national home, my purpose in this project has been to move in the opposite direction, from America out into the world. In their textual reflections on homemaking away from home, Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein negotiated spheres that were “separate” in a wholly new way. The various examples of their resettlement carry the matter of homemaking far beyond public-private debates to something richer and stranger, expanding our notions of what it means to dwell in the world.

Pearl Buck’s textual home in China opens the door to a serious consideration of the potential for and obstacles to cross-cultural understanding, as well as the construction of national identity. Gertrude Stein’s textual homemaking, meanwhile, is a fine example of writing “into”
a place, a process that began by shoring up her own image, and then reaching out to commit herself to a place and expanding into a life style. The home and identity she willed into existence gradually fit her like her own skin, gradually resembled her—as Picasso said his portrait of her would do.

Together these examples demonstrate that relationships with places are in ways as complicated as relationships with people; what one might consider essential categories of identity in one place, like nationality or religion or even gender, may recede in importance or vanish entirely in another place. Things fall away, if not entirely apart, and one is left to start over, to achieve “home” and a sense of belonging somewhere else by overcoming resistance or obstacles in the environment, and finally leaving some mark of self on the place.

In this meditation on issues of home in works by Pearl Buck and Gertrude Stein, I hope to have demonstrated how for these writers the most intimate activities of homemaking in the private sphere are complicated by cultural context and the influences of the greater world. In drawing on multiple resources in constructing their homes, including national identity, geography, culture, language, memory, and gender expectations, Buck and Stein offer provocative insights on how home can be “made” in the world.
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