"I Like Things Simple, but it Must Be Simple Through Complication": Re-Reading Gertrude Stein

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“I like things simple, but it must be simple through complication”:

Re-reading Gertrude Stein

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Hilary J. Marcus
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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To My Best Girls—Hannah, Sydney, and Hailey
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ABSTRACT

“I like things simple, but they must be simple through complication”: Re-reading Gertrude Stein, examines a selection of Stein’s texts with an insistence on re-reading Stein’s writing as process. The focus is on how Stein’s process of writing engenders new ways of reading, “breaking into language” and inviting her reader to engage in a kind of dialogic relationship with her and her words. I argue that Stein’s texts are radically open, even “democratic,” offering readers to make independent connections between her words and their imaginations. While many things have been said about Stein’s writing, rarely do critics simply read her words as they appear on the page. This project examines the vexed critical response to Stein and works to show that Stein’s writing necessitates “re-visioning” critical protocols as traditional critical approaches continue to mis-re-present Stein’s words. This text does not participate in “explaining Gertrude Stein game” that so many critical responses engage in. My goal is not to make Stein “accessible” to my readers by explaining her words in “clear” language. Rather, taking a “postmodern feminist critical approach,” my aim is to engage the reader in Stein’s process of writing, which in turn, engages the reader in his/her own process of reading. The readings of Stein’s texts that I offer (ranging from her most “experimental” to her most “accessible”) are open-ended and intentionally indecisive. They are meant to present one possible reading among many possibilities. I argue that reading Stein’s words as she wrote them is to read Stein as offering us (all-of-us) access to language where nothing is denied and everything is included. Following Nancy Gray’s approach, I work to write what I know of Stein’s words without neglecting the “know-ing.”
Prologue

This project has been very much experimental both in its content, reading Stein’s process as process, and in its form. I worked to construct this project as a kind of walking with the reader through a small amount of Stein’s work as a way of arguing that Stein’s work needs to be experienced and read as experience. I interject my readings and call attention to my own process at many points in the project as a way of letting, literally, my process show through. What might seem to be redundancy is a result of my strategy for making my critical presence obvious. I found early in my work on Stein that writing about her work is always problematic. As soon as one writes about, one presumes a kind of mastery of the text that s/he writes about. I realize that my conviction to write “nearby” Stein rather than about her is a difficult critical endeavor. Moreover, while I believe this performs an important function in the re-reading of Stein, I ultimately want to argue that what Stein has created in her disruptions and re-visions of generic and critical paradigms is a way of re-envisioning critical protocols.

Stein invites her reader into her text as a collaborative partner who participates in its creation each time s/he reads. Her texts are radically open, even “democratic,” offering readers the opportunity to make independent connections between her words and their imaginations. In her most experimental writing, all the words on the page have equal value, freeing them to relate to each other in almost unlimited ways. She produces in her work a vision of openness and plurality, providing critical as well as textual space for interrogation of seemingly fixed boundaries.
Introduction: A Complicated Critical History

Gertrude Stein is a name that has come to embody both literary genius and, in critic Michael Gold’s words, a “literary idiot” (Gold 21). The question of how one ought to read Stein’s work has always been and continues to be complicated by her status as being “more talked about by more people who have never read a line of hers than any other author” (Cotes, 69). As I work on Stein, it is not uncommon for people to ask incredulously “can you really read her?” as if there must be some secret to unlocking Stein’s texts so as to understand them. This curious tension between Stein as a modernist literary hero and Stein as a secretive and coded (often considered crazy) figure is perhaps the reason why the critical response to Stein has been “all over the map.” Stein criticism arguably offers one of the most complicated and also fascinating moments in the history of American literature. Interestingly however, while critics have always had things to say about Stein’s work, it was not until the 1980s, nearly 40 years after Stein’s death, that her work was widely critically appreciated. Stein wrote at the same time as modernists such as Hemingway (her student), Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. However, she did not receive nearly the amount of critical attention that her colleagues did. She was arguably the most precocious challenger of conventions, which modernists were valued for challenging, and the most prolific writer of them all, yet her position as a modernist author and her critical reception have been precarious in the sense that she has received
the least “competent criticism” (Reid 3). Even B.L. Reid, perhaps Stein’s most negative critic, has commented upon the insufficient critical literature on Stein:

The critics by and large, have fled from Gertrude Stein. I doubt that any other modern writer so widely considered important has received so little competent criticism, whether it is measured qualitatively or quantitatively. For example, she has not had one-tenth the volume of commentary that has been allotted to James Joyce. (Reid 3)

Reid, however, goes on to justify this lack of criticism by stating that, “Joyce is ten times the greater artist” and by arguing that Stein is not really an artist at all.

Gertrude Stein was a writer. She used language. Writing was her “intellectual recreation.” However, perhaps because Stein was so open to playing with/in language such that her words do not look like most writers’ words (even though she used everyday common words), critics have a tendency to qualify her words as something else. Critics consistently have approached Stein’s writing as if it were a puzzle in need of solving or code and in need of breaking. As a result, Stein’s words are read in comparison to already-existing art forms such as painting (mostly cubist). She has been persistently identified as an inventor of a private language with her words taken to be nothing more than childlike utterances or unconscious gibberish. Just as often, critics have tended to read her words as evidence of mental instability and emotional fragility. It is not uncommon for critics to denounce Stein angrily as a hoaxter, one who foisted her nonsensical and grammatically flawed writing upon her readership (some go as far as claiming she wrote “automatically”) and passed it off as intellectually innovative.
Despite the overwhelmingly negative critical accounts, Stein had supporters from the establishment of the literary world. Carl Van Vechten, Thornton Wilder, Katherine Anne Porter, Sherwood Anderson, and Donald Sutherland, for example, worked to prove that her writing was valuable and vital to the modernist emphasis on radical transgression of narrative style and discursive categories. Some of these supporters, particularly Van Vechten, were largely responsible for Stein’s numerous posthumous publications.

However, for every supportive contemporary critic of Stein, there were many others who were less appreciative of her writing. In a 1929 review of Stein’s *Useful Knowledge*, Sylvia Norman writes, “If Miss Stein’s *Useful Knowledge* points out anything, it is that the loafing mind, equipped with language, can reach a triumph of chaotic imbecility” (52). In 1934 B.F. Skinner, a Harvard psychologist, wrote “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” an essay that claims Stein’s writing is really nothing more than automatic writing written by a “second personality successfully split off from Miss Stein’s conscious self” (50). This second personality, Skinner argues, is “intellectually unopinionated” and “emotionally cold” (52). In other words, in Skinner’s argument, there is no possible way Stein could have written as an intellectual or had intellectually worthy things to say because she wrote “automatically” and because automatic writing is necessarily unintellectual. In 1936 Michael Gold wrote “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot,” in which he claims Stein’s words “resemble the monotonous gibberings of paranoiacs in the private wards of asylums” (24). This is another way of disregarding Stein’s words as simply being crazy babble.
Satiric imitation was another reactionary response to Stein’s work. It was not uncommon for critics to question the intent of her writing. Stein’s harsher critics often argued that she was fooling everyone and simply mocking the literary establishment as a kind of perverse joke. Critics such as Stuart Pratt Sherman spent their time attempting to prove Stein to be a fraud by copying her writing style. In Sherman’s 1937 essay “A Note on Gertrude Stein,” he sets up an “experiment” meant to prove that Stein’s writing is a “method of madness” (263). He would write one hundred words on a sheet of paper, then cut the words out and sort them by parts of speech. He would then shuffle the words and put them together, joined with punctuation (again randomly selected). His experiment read thus: “Red stupidly; but go slowly. The hope slim. Drink yeah! Dream! Swiftly pretty people through daffodils slip lazily consumes old books. Up by a sedate sweet heart roar darkly loud orchards. Life, the purple flame, simply proclaims a poem” (266). Sherman “proves” Stein’s writing to be “ludicrous” upon concluding that his experiment is equivalent to her work” (Sherman 267). Such “experiments” are typical of the satirical pieces that have been written to demonstrate the “unworthiness” of Stein’s work and prove Stein’s writing as nothing more than “baby talk” or to categorize it as absurdly “Steinese” (Burton 56). Richard Burton’s characterization of Stein as a “self-advertiser of pseudo-intellectual antics” in his 1914 essay appropriately entitled “Posing” precisely captures the sentiment of Stein’s more agitated critics (57).

In 1958 B.L. Reid wrote an entire book trying to prove Stein’s “worthlessness.” His book, *Art By Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*, is intended to write Stein out of literature, literally. Stein’s writing, Reid claims, has “sought
obliteration of the narrative line; it is not strictly comparable to anything in the main stream of literature in our century” (Reid 70). Moreover, “Stein’s true position is anti-literary, anti-intellectual, often anti-human and anti-moral...her work possesses no beauty, no instruction, no passion...[but] her failure to communicate is the crime for which we will finally have to hang her” (91). In Reid’s view, Stein’s writing lacks most, if not all, of the qualities we demand from literature. It actively disrupts the reader’s ability to follow the story and participate in the plot in order to get to a conclusive endpoint that we have learned to desire. Stein’s stories, of course, do not allow for the conventional journey readers have learned to expect where he/she is confronted with something troubling (a mysterious event, character, etc.) and then navigates through the text, solving the mystery and eventually reaching (joyously) the conclusion (the resolution thereby moving the reader from being confused or lacking evidence into the position of the knower, knowing the ending). Because Reid cannot make Stein’s texts function in this expected conventional manner, he argues that Stein simply cannot be taken seriously because she uses “private, abstract language” (180). His argument thus goes: he first claims an artist must communicate with his/her audience. He then claims that Stein is “talking to herself.” Because Reid assumes that she is not talking to “us,” Reid concludes that Stein is “not an artist” (169). Another related argument Reid makes for why Stein is “not an artist” begins with the claim that Stein’s “art” is “one of subtraction” in which she “does not reflect” but “rules out the imagination” (72). Reid then concludes that Stein cannot really be doing art because “art by subtraction finally subtracts art itself” (72).
Reid also attempts to account for the difficulty critics have had in “understanding” Stein’s work. He argues that the “confusion” all goes back to what he calls “the original mistake.” This “mistake,” Reid argues, happened “when she defined herself as an artist.” He thus claims, “most of the confusion about Gertrude Stein seems the result of trying to understand her in a mistaken context” (72).

Reid’s text in particular is a good example of a Stein critic who just cannot leave her alone. One may wonder what is at stake for these angry critics. This is the question I have grappled with in my reading of Stein criticism. What is it about Stein’s work that infuriated so many of her critics? I will examine this question in the thesis.

In addition to Stein’s supporters and detractors, there have been critics who appreciate Stein’s work, but not for what it is as much as what it has the potential to be. In these readings, Stein is posited as an author’s author. That is, Stein’s work is inspirational and meaningful to other authors but has no value in its own right. Malcolm Cowley’s 1946 essay “Gertrude Stein, Writer or Word Scientist?” first published in The New York Weekly Herald-Tribune epitomizes such a view of Stein’s work. He writes, “I think of her often not as a writer primarily but as a scientist in his laboratory working at some problem that apparently has no connection with man or society... Her style is like a chemical useless in its pure state, powerful when added to other mixtures” (Cowley 21).

Harvey Eagleston makes a similar argument in his 1936 essay “Gertrude Stein: Method in Madness,” calling Stein a “tool maker” (165). He does not define what “tools” she has made specifically but says she is not capable of using them herself: “Her writing as a whole is like a splendid workshop. The tools are all there, sharpened, polished and
arranged in shining order, but that is all. The work of art they were to make is missing...” (166). Based on this reading, Stein becomes the embodiment of lack. Cowley and Eagleton are two examples of this critical tendency to read Stein as being only potentially useful to other writers but presently lacking as a writer herself. Furthermore, such a reading regards Stein as a user of language but not an agent of it, a reading which works to further deny that Stein’s work does anything at all in its own right.

In 1965 Michael J. Hoffman wrote *The Development of Abstraction in the Writing of Gertrude Stein*, which was an attempt to read Stein (and legitimize her writing) in relation to the plastic arts (this is the earliest of multiple attempts to prove Stein’s worthiness by locating her writing in terms of the plastic arts, a critical method I will discuss at length later on). Hoffman clearly intends to validate Stein’s writing but this is not what he ends up doing. Rather, because he has already decided that language is necessarily communicative and that communication requires particular referentiality (words must refer to certain things for meaning to exist because “words are inherently associative”), Stein’s words turn out to be “an art that created its own reality” (178). Hoffman argues that Stein uses words “as plastic elements in creations that have no iconic relationship to anything conceptually recognizable to the external world” (153). To reach this conclusion, he first defines Stein’s art as one of “abstraction.” He then defines abstraction as subtracting parts of elements in order to get to the essence of things. Hoffman’s argument ultimately leads to something similar to what Reid does because when he talks about these “essences” he says they are not readable inside of dominant discourse. He concludes that “abstract art [his categorization of Stein’s art]... is an
impossibility, especially in writing” (176). Thus both Hoffman and Reid end up saying that in Stein’s work there is nothing there to read.

In 1970 Richard Bridgman, one of Stein’s most influential critics, attempted to legitimize Stein’s work by “pulling it together.” In *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, Bridgman sets out to pull together Stein’s work in the order she wrote it and, by doing so, to make the case that Stein’s work is worthy of the same critical attention that other modernist writers have received. Bridgman announces his project as “a preliminary inventory of Stein’s literary estate” (xiii). Bridgman’s project is important in the sense that it did compile Stein’s work in such a way that it was apparent she had created a huge literary opus, an opus that deserved more serious attention than it had previously received. However, Bridgman’s assessments of Stein’s work leave much to be desired. He reads Stein’s texts as filled with “coded words” and then proceeds to go on a decoding mission translating words such as “cow” and “Caesar” into “parts of the body, physical acts, and character traits” which lead him to make observations about Stein’s work as self-referential and emotionally charged: “Even as she approached her fifties, Gertrude Stein’s need to record her passions remained unquenchable” (148-9). It is perhaps his frustration with his decoding practices (Stein’s words resist singular interpretations) that led him to make the claim that Stein was “an improvisational writer” who wrote “thousands of pages of disconnected trivia” (150). While he states early on that he is writing a “description of her words” rather than a description of her life and reputation (as earlier critics had often done), and thus vows he is taking Stein seriously as a writer, he does not refrain from commenting on Stein’s “emotional life” (24). In fact, Stein ends up seeming dangerously
close to an emotional mess, based on Bridgman’s account. Early on he claims that Stein, “permitted her feelings to spill messily onto the pages of her college themes” (34). Similarly he argues that if *The Making of Americans* is “regarded as a novel rather than a psychological and stylistic day book it is [...] a disaster” (61). Bridgman reads *The Making of Americans* as “a psychologically liberating work for Gertrude Stein,” where she is “muttering reminders and encouragements to herself, imprecations, and cries of alarm” (61). For a self-acclaimed “dispassionate critic,” Bridgman spends a surprising amount of energy commenting on Stein’s emotional state and making claims about her psychological state. In his view, Stein’s writing is the result of Stein’s “purging her psyche of old ghosts” and recording it onto the page (79). In his critical assessment of Stein’s style, he declares that her “rambling compound sentences were means of pulling together the disarray of her consciousness” (73). Bridgman’s text is an excellent example of criticism that seeks to appreciate Stein’s writing as such but fails to read her words without falling into a trap that filters her words through the constructed perceptions of her personality.

Beginning in the late 1970s and hitting full force in the ’80s, Stein received a surge of critical attention as postmodernism hit the literary critical scene. If we look back to 1963 at Susan Sontag’s now seminal essay “Against Interpretation,” we can locate a moment where critical interpretative frameworks are called to task. Sontag argues that we have been reading literature in a way that neglects a whole aspect of it. Critical interpretations have neglected *how* literature works by only looking at the content (the what) of works. The focus of interpretation has been on discovering the hidden meaning
of the art and in the process of searching for such meaning, according to Sontag, criticism has neglected the “artfulness” of art. She calls for a reconsideration of critical interpretation: “Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag, 550). Sontag’s challenge is for criticism to look at how art is and not just what it is: “the function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (550). Sontag’s contribution, then, in this new strand of criticism loosely termed “postmodernism,” focuses on how the art works and not just what it says.

It is precisely this emphasis on “how “cultural texts and practices work to produce meaning in which structuralist and post-structuralist theory are grounded. Drawing heavily from the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, both of these theoretical schools are interested in examining how language means and not just what language means. De Saussure divided units of meaning in signifying systems (language) into two parts, signifiers and signifieds, which together make up a sign. He argues that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. The word (signifier) “horse,” for example, has no essential qualities of "horseness." There is no essential reason why the signifier “horse” should produce the signified horse (the concept of horse/horseness). The relation between the signifier, horse, could just as randomly produce the signified “tree.” Since the relation between the signifier and signified (word and concept) is arbitrary rather than “real” or “natural,” de Saussure then argues meaning (what we count as the horse or tree and how we value them, for example) is the result of difference. The signifier horse means the signified horse precisely because it does not mean tree or car or
cat. Thus the system (structure of language) works not by expressing natural meaning but by producing difference. From this understanding of language, structuralists argue that language does not reflect an already existing reality (it is not simply a mode of articulating what is already there). Rather, the function of language is to organize and construct how we understand our reality. It turns out that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is the result of cultural conventions—a cultural agreement about what and how a sign means. This is to say that it is the structure of language that both makes meaning possible at all and determines how things mean. It is the business of semiotics then to make explicit the rules/conventions of language that oversee the production of meaning.

Similarly, post-structuralists also understand language as a process of production of meaning. However, post-structuralists reject the idea of a consistent underlying structure (despite the arbitrariness of the structure) that produces stable meaning. Rather, in post-structuralism, meaning is always in flux and thus always in production and never determinant. As Jacques Derrida (a founding theorist of post-structuralism) tells us in *Writing and Difference*, signifiers do not produce signifieds but rather they produce more signifiers. Meaning is thus a result of signification that is in continual motion. Derrida argues that if one looks through a dictionary one will see the “indefinite referral of signifier to signified…which gives the signified meaning no respite…so that it always signifies again” (Derrida, 25). What follows then is that meaning can only be understood as steady or secure when read within a particular discourse, when the signifiers and the signified are temporarily limited because they are interacting within a particular context.
However, even in a limited textual space, post-structuralists argue, meaning is never fully present because there are always more possibilities for understanding how meaning works in a text. Meaning is always "inter-textual." It is in this sense that Roland Barthes argues in his 1968 essay, "Death of the Author," that text can never be read completely (definitively) in terms of authorial intention, but rather text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes 146). Barthes calls attention to the fact that texts are cultural productions and draw on cultural sensibilities and produce meaning in multiple and ongoing ways. It is in the era of "postmodernism" that we are dealing with a body of critical theory that wants us to understand that what counts as meaningful is not "natural" or "innate." Meaning is not simply represented in language but constructed by or produced in language. What deconstructionists such as Derrida and Barthes do is make us aware that what counts as meaningful and what seems to make-sense is a cultural agreement.

The process of reading Stein within a postmodern critical framework developed throughout the 1980s in the work of critics such as Marianne DeKoven (1983), Catharine Stimpson (1984), Ulla Dydo (1985), Shari Benstock (1986), Janice L. Doane (1986), and Harriet Scott Chessman (1989). These critics applied a variety of critical tools and approaches to Stein’s texts which work to open up a plurality of ways to locate meaning in her work. Such critical approaches draw from a number of fields such as feminist, psychoanalytic, linguistic, deconstructive and lesbian theoretical protocols, all of which are broadly encompassed under the postmodern critical framework. Now that critics are
looking for how meaning works in texts rather than simply what the text means there are
all sorts of plural possibilities for what meaning can be. What emerges in Stein criticism
at this historical moment then is not a consistent or definitive reading of Stein, but rather
a range of critical analyses that move towards identifying and appreciating Stein’s textual
practices as challenging dominant modes of locating meaning. It is in this sense that Shari
Benstock, for example, asserts that Stein’s subversion of conventionality is “not merely
resisting the grammatical law but writing itself in, around, against, and through that law”
(30). It is precisely the emphasis on how Stein wrote that allows for these critics to read
her writing as challenging the literary and cultural conventions (rules that equal
constraints) that make speaking on one’s own terms as a woman difficult, if not
impossible, in dominant discourse. It thus becomes important for these critics to question
the ways Stein’s writing has been written about in terms of her writing as a woman,
because she was an outlaw not only in that she wrote in the way she wrote but also
because she did so as a woman. She thus disrupted dominant discourse in two ways: she
did not “communicate” but even if she had, she still would have been a lesser
communicator because she was a woman. Reading Stein with attention to her status as a
woman writer is not new. In fact, questions about Stein’s person and more specifically
her seeming deviance from feminine norms, have had much to do with reading Stein
primarily as a personality, even an outlaw personality, rather than a writer. As Stein’s
writing was ignored or written off as unsubstantial her life was declared interesting. For
example, in *Axel’s Castle*, Edmund Wilson conflates Stein’s status a writer with her
perceived personality announcing Stein as “a literary personality of unmistakable
originality and distinction” (qtd in DeKoven, “Introduction,” 471), which works to ensure that she remained primarily a personality and not a writer. Stein speaks to this tendency in Everybody's Autobiography: “it always did bother me that the American Public were more interested in me than in my work. And after all, there is no sense in it because if it were not for my work they would not be interested in me so why should they not be more interested in my work than in me” (50). Stein is recognizing that she has been simultaneously produced as an iconic figure and popularized for her perceived iconoclastic characteristics. The tendency to read Stein’s literary product as a narrative of her personal peculiarities, is a process that happens far too often in critical accounts of women’s writing, in particular, women’s “experimental” writing. The result is often that attention gets diverted from serious interaction with work that profoundly disrupts dominant conventions by retreating to safer, more familiar outlets: Stein as personality vs Stein as literary innovator. It is within this context that I find Stein’s work to be of such importance to the conceptualization of writing that would do without ideological limitations, needing instead to be taken on its own terms.

As critical attention has turned to how literature means and not just what it means, Stein’s disruption of dominant discourse can be more fully realized as a fundamental disruption. The same work that older critics called meaningless and crazy now seemed not only possible but also necessary. While this critical shift has opened up Stein criticism and touched on important critical elements in Stein’s work, there has remained a critical tendency to read Stein in relation to familiar paradigms. In the thesis I specifically locate these tendencies in the work of two critics, Marianne DeKoven and Wendy
Steiner. Steiner’s text, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (1978) is perhaps the earliest critical response to Stein under the influence of a postmodern interpretive framework. I argue that Steiner’s account ends up misreading Stein and constructing a project for Stein which, when taken to its logical conclusion, must fail. Nonetheless, Steiner’s text remains very important for marking the shift in Stein criticism towards more open and self-reflexive readings of Stein’s work. Moreover, Steiner’s text functions as a building block, as it were, for other critics to continue grappling with critical strategies for opening up Stein’s work. Similarly, I examine Marianne DeKoven’s 1983 *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* at length because this text engages in contemporary psychoanalytic theory as it has been influenced by semiotics as a way to read Stein. While I find DeKoven’s argument to be flawed on several levels, as I do not read Stein as “escaping” language (DeKoven’s “a different language”), DeKoven offers the first serious and lengthy application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to Stein’s text. And, like Steiner’s text, this work served as a point of departure for opening up Stein criticism. Although she retreats to a place of utopia to locate Stein’s writing in purely “pre-patriarchical” space, DeKoven has used a postmodern framework. She reads Stein’s words as “limitless, dense, [and as] semantic plenitude,” where Stein’s words enact a kind of “liberation from the strictures of hierarchical, sensible, or monologistic order” (16). Her contribution lies in the attempt to open up Stein’s words, reading them as liberating and leaving them open to be liberating however one chooses to read them.
In the last decade, there has been a lot of activity going on in Stein scholarship, particularly in journal articles and dissertations. Emerging out of the academy, dissertations are indicative of potential publishing, and by their numbers alone indicate that there has been new activity in Stein scholarship. Between 1998 and 2004, there were 119 dissertations written with Gertrude Stein as a prominent focal point (Firstsearch). Interestingly, however, only 11 out of the 119 dissertations that were written between 1998 and 2004 were works that focused entirely on Stein as the critical subject. These numbers reflect a trend in recent Stein scholarship that focuses on reading Stein in conjunction with other authors. It remains to be seen what new direction this criticism will take us.

Through textual interruption of normative literary and linguistic conventions such as narrative structure, linguistic signification, character development, genre boundaries, and use of repetition, Stein produces a complicated critique of discursive and cultural limits. Expectations of meaning, linearity, closure, genre are challenged at every point in Stein’s texts. Through Stein’s conventional disruptions, these expectations, which generally remain assumed, become glaringly obvious as conventions. These conventions have everything to do with the ways that literature “communicates” with its readership. As we saw in earlier Stein criticism, it was Stein’s “failure” to communicate that ultimately caused her writing to “fail” in various critical accounts. Her failure to communicate by the rules, most obviously via her disruption of grammatical rules, is a constant violation of culture. As Stein asks in “Sentences,” “Supposing a sentence to be
clear whose is it” (148). Stein is raising the question of how communicating by the established rules produces particular and thus possessive meanings (“whose is it?”). Culture demands that experience be communicated. Particular cultures demand particular forms of communication and expect particular kinds of stories. Fiction is always a kind of lie (story) that is supposed to communicate truth. It is in this sense that literature is a cultural repository for its most cherished truths and ideals. The way Stein “violates” culture is by not “communicating” by the established rules. However, this allows her to “deconstruct” culture (altering cultural constructions) by revealing its limits in her violation of cultural rules and opening up our sense of what is possible. Stein thus involves us in experience and in the process of confronting conventions. She opens up our ability to engage in the experience freely while and at the same time recognizing what expectations our culture demands.

Reading Stein in this way follows Judith Butler’s theorization of what happens to the “outside” or that which is left out by dominant discourses. I read Stein’s texts as an embodiment of a site, as Judith Butler says, “where discourse meets its limits” (Butler, in Bodies that Matter, 153). Butler writes of place, “one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome,” as a way to think about how to stand in a critical relation to the workings of dominant ideology (153). In particular, Butler is insists on cultivating a space “outside” of dominant discourse (conventions, rules, grammatical systems) to challenge our most basic assumptions, “where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability” (153). To stand “outside”
discourse then reveals it as a construct that relies on particular social relations and locates meaning in particular ways. Reading Stein’s texts as sites of “linguistic impropriety,” as Butler theorizes, works to open up new ways of reading old codes. For example, in her challenging of generic conventions (the novel *Three Lives*, the lyrical poem, *Stanzas in Meditation*, the autobiographies *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*) she moves “outside” what seems to “make sense” and towards the subversion of social and cultural conventions, since generic conventions are basically metonymic, mirroring Western cultural values of hierarchy, linear progression and mastery. To read Stein in this way is to recognize Stein’s work as a critical locale for analyzing interrelatedness of textual and cultural processes of making meaning and how these processes structure what seems possible in terms of writing, knowing, and, using language.

For Stein, words are “things in themselves” and language is “a real thing.” Her words both break and follow expected forms. She uses the most common of words, and yet her writing is anything but ordinary. For Stein, language becomes an experience rather than simply a tool for communication (though it can be that as well). However, as we have seen in the criticism, Stein’s language as experience has often been turned into recognizable acts of communicating (or complete failure to communicate). My reading of Stein then is one that does not attempt to say what exactly, or for certain, Stein did. Such a reading would only be a variant of conventional criticism. Rather I am interested in taking Stein on her own terms. The way to best do this is by reading her process, not “translating” her product.
I focus on how Stein writes and how her words can operate to radically disrupt conventions and open up new ways of understanding, reading, and experiencing literature. I do not trace every moment of disruption in her text or try to say what her strategy is for breaking or not breaking expected grammatical sequences and conventions. To chart her process in such a way would be yet another way of decoding Stein’s words and searching for a formula to determine her process in definitive terms. Instead, I am interested in reading her words, experiencing her writing, and paying attention to the questions, discomforts, and tension that her work both produces and also attends to. I read Stein’s work as a resistance to the political and social structure of Western patriarchal culture and the very process of thinking that both created and also sustains these hegemonic structures. I read her neither as escaping these structures nor embracing them. Rather, I read Stein as using language as her own, entering language as both fully aware of the literary and cultural restraints that are ideologically inscribed in language and also unhindered by such restraints. Reading Stein’s words as she wrote them and as my project aims to do is to read Stein as offering us (all-of-us) access to language where nothing is denied and everything is included.
CHAPTER 1

“Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”:
Breaking into Language with Gertrude Stein

They always say [...] that my writing is appalling but they always quote it, and
what is more, they quote it correctly...My sentences do get under their skin, only
they do not know that they do.
—Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

Can a question be clear. Can a pin be a shape. Can a length be different.
Two, two are not more than one when there is a dress. This is no obstacle.
—Gertrude Stein, “A Long Gay Book”

Gertrude Stein uses language. The English language, written by an American
living in France, was Stein’s “intellectual recreation.” She was not an inventor of a secret
language. She tells the reader through Alice in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:
“The english language was her medium and with the english language the task was to be
achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her, it was an
escape into imitative emotionalism” (Selected Writings 112). She uses language with all
of its historical baggage, acutely aware of its complexities. As Stein knew, words are
expected to behave in very specific ways. Their “job,” it is understood, is to stand in for
meaning, to convey, to communicate, and to express something “underlying” their form
on the page. This may be the one thing that we think we know for sure. From before we
are even able to speak, we are taught that language is first and foremost a tool of
communication. One must speak to express *himself*. We assume that language “makes us” human. It is language that separates us from the animals and moves us towards “civilization.” It is the “evidence” of our humanity, our “beingness.” It is thus disruptive to our very sense of “beingness” to interrupt linguistic conventions, to challenge language as *some-thing* as opposed to language as a vehicle for communicating and expressing reality.

Stein profoundly interrupted the ways in which language is supposed to operate (communicate). After nearly 100 years of criticism Stein continues to defy critical agreement. Her words are often read as impenetrable and thus “uncommunicatable” for which she is rendered incompetent or worse: as B.L. Reid would have it, “[Stein’s] failure to communicate is a crime for which we finally have to hang her” (91). Her words are compared to cubist painting or she is said to have found the secret to the primordial past or have invented her own language or, often said by her more infuriated detractors, she capitalized on her lack of skill (grammatical) and “fooled” her readership. She has been proclaimed as “mad” and “crazy” and a trickster who passed off nonsense as ingenuity. Rarely is it said that Stein simply used language with all of its complexities.

On her 1934-35-lecture tour in America, Stein shared how she thinks about language:

> Of course you might say why not invent new names, new languages but that cannot be done. It takes a tremendous amount of inner necessity to invent even one word, one can invent imitating movements and emotions in sounds, and in the poetical language of some languages you have that, the german language as
a language suffers from this what the words mean sound too much like what they do, and children do these things by one sort or a other inventions, but this has really nothing to do with language. Language as a real thing is not imitation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as long as humanity is anything. So everyone must stay with the language which has in it all the history that has come to be spoken and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation. (*Lectures in America* 237-38)

Stein’s understanding of language as “a real thing” is the problem for many of her readers and critics alike. As I have already said, we learn language is a vehicle for communication. It needs to be stable and orderly so that everyone can understand what is being communicated. Yet if language is, as Stein insists, also “a real thing,” then how can we be sure that it will behave in the orderly systematic ways that we need it to for communication? Or, said differently, how can we be certain we know what language means and how it means if it also a “real thing”? For Stein, language is what it is. As a writer she does what she does with her language, using everything and leaving out nothing. According to Stein, a writer does not invent language anew but rather writes in his or her language as it “has come to be spoken and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation” (*Lectures in America* 238). To understand language as an intellectual recreation as Stein did, is to understand language as both a real thing and not a real thing at the same. This is to recognize that words written on the page are both materially there, we can see them and touch them, and at the same time those same words are out of sight; we learn to read through them in search of something else (meaning). To understand language as “a real thing” is to simultaneously allow for its orderly process (communicative) and to interrupt this function. While Stein used common
words (even in her most experimental works she used common words), her writing consistently invokes critical responses that are committed to positing her use of language as a puzzle in need of solving. What she did, she did with simple words.

Stein did what she did and that has not changed. However, with new critical vocabularies emerging, we recognize Stein’s work as essential to understanding linguistic conventions and cultural contexts that structure what we think we can do and say and know in our time. As Mikhail Bakhtin says, “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—over populated with the intentions of others” (291). Gertrude Stein knew this. Stein profoundly interrupts cultural constructions of language and meaning. Her words, as often as critics have tried, resist translation or appropriation (though certainly not quotation). Instead, her words consistently offer possibilities of reading against the grain of our rule-bounded language that are generally taken for granted, and asking how notions of meaning are produced and maintained.

Catherine Belsey, in her 1980 work *Critical Practice*, interrogates the ways that common sense works in relation to the idea of language as neutral: “it is argued that what seems obvious and natural is not necessarily so, but that on the contrary the ‘obvious’ and the ‘natural’ are not *given* but *produced* in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience” (3). Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, Belsey understands ideology to refer not to any particular doctrine of
beliefs “deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals” but rather to “the very condition of our experience of the world, unconscious precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted” (Belsey 5). Ideology is inscribed in language and, more specifically, in discourse (“a domain of language-use”) which allows for “certain shared assumptions” not to signal particular patterns of ideas but to act as “a way thinking, speaking, experiencing” (Belsey 5). The work of ideology is thus to conceal and obscure the “production” of what we take to be reality, positing it instead as always already given and complete. Language is ideology’s vehicle of escape, so to speak. As long as language is thought to be simply a “medium in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about independently constituted world of things,” ideology masquerades as common sense, obvious, and natural (Bakhtin 291). As Belsey says, “the transparency of language,” it turns out, “is an illusion” (4). Language never is and never can be neutral. To investigate language and the ways language is used in our culture then is to ask, how does language as a rule bounded orderly medium structure (and bound) what seems possible to say, think, and know?

As Jacques Derrida has suggested, literary language is the place to go to question how meaning is constructed and knowledge is produced precisely because it seems so open and yet all sorts of rules structure it. These rules are ideological formations that are so ingrained in the ways that we have been taught to think and speak, we only notice them when they are violated. Gertrude Stein’s writing is a site where violation,
discomfort and, ultimately, the possibility of recognizing and questioning ideological and hegemonic conventions can take place.

Our stories are limited. They are bounded by rules and regulations that are so naturalized that we do not even know they exist. And yet, as soon as a writer defies the boundaries of these transparent but always-already-there rules, we know it. We feel it. Challenging these conventions by way of questioning storytelling and reading practices, is one way to investigate the relations between language, thinking, knowing, and understanding our world and our ways of being in the world. It is with this intent to challenge conventional categories and assumptions that I read Gertrude Stein. I thus read Stein’s work in terms of questions about not only what constitutes story telling but also about how we count things as meaningful at all. Historically speaking, this matters because it is with the advent of poststructuralist critical discourse that the emphasis on not just what is told but how it is told, that inquiring into the production of meaning (how we count things as meaningful at all) seems both possible and necessary for studying literature as a cultural repository of ideologically produced conventions.

The challenge of writing about Stein’s writing is to refrain from stopping her process. Her words are so full of movement and possibility. Paying attention to these movements is, I believe, the way to become fully aware of their possibility in a limitless sense. Her “lively words” written down on the page are there to be read and reread. Yet they are not static. As I will work to show in my readings, Stein’s words interact in ways
that do not foreclose but rather stay open to limitless possible reading. In this sense Stein’s writing is something, it is there to be read, but is not solely about something in particular. It both is and it isn’t something at the same time. Writing about Stein’s writing as a critic, where critical writing is supposed to interpret (write “about” towards a definitive conclusion) is a difficult task. I am aware of this tension of trying to write about what Stein did and at the same time trying to avoid saying for certain what she has done. In an effort to read Stein’s words as “lively” and experience her language as “a real thing,” I will read her process as process and follow Roland Barthes’ writerly ways of reading. It is my hope that my readings will enact the process of text and reader coming together to reveal some possibilities (not all) of Stein’s writing. Stein’s writing fundamentally challenges reading practices and disrupts the categories and conventions on which we organize our discursive practices. Her process then is one that plays with the very system of ordering upon which we depend (in order) to use language to speak, to listen, and to know. Her use of language both evokes and displaces structures of meaning and the very process of thought by which those structures are produced and maintained. Her words thus open up possibilities for us to question and pay attention to the discourses and hegemonic structures that we are always already implicated and shaped by, and always involved within. When we pay attention to how she wrote, her texts make us uncertain about how to read (i.e. what to count as meaningful and what to expect from a text).
Writing that makes our assumptions about the world obvious as assumptions and potentially problematic, violates the very rules and conditions by which we structure our thoughts, our ways of speaking and our ways of telling our stories. In “Ada” (1910), Stein questions how we tell our stories. By refusing to “tell” us a definitive story, she is asking what constitutes a “story,” which has the effect of raising philosophical/existential questions of being, living, and existing.

The only thing constant in “Ada” is the emphasis on the action of telling and not on what is being told. After several pages of references to the telling of stories, “very pretty stories,” “delightful stories,” “charming stories,” “very nice stories,” Stein tells us Ada “came to be happier than anybody else who was living then. It is easy to believe this thing” (“Ada” 102). What thing? At this moment, we realize Stein is not “telling” us anything specific. But aren’t stories supposed to be specific? Telling is supposed to be authoritative. The storyteller is imbued with the knowledge, the story; and we read to learn, to appreciate, and to know. In Critical Practice, Belsey describes the conventional expectations of storytelling to build up to the moment of closure: “[T]he story moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure... the moment of closure is the point at which the events of the story become fully intelligible to the reader” (70). Stein, however, refuses this role or, at least, complicates it. She messes with the process of telling and thereby interrupts the process of knowing. She cues an expectation for a form of discourse, the discourse of storytelling, and then does not pay off or, at least does not
pay off in the way that we expect (a “solution” as closure to the story). What is important then is not only that she does not pay off but also what happens to us as we encounter the text and experience the process of our expectations being subverted. “Ada” ends with a universalizing claim that is peculiarly similar to the highly recognizable and cherished fairytale genre: “And certainly Ada all her living then was happier in living than anyone else who ever could, who was, who is, who ever will be living” (103). Isn’t it interesting that Stein would use a phrase so reminiscent of the phrase “happily ever after” and yet deny any of the certainties or absolutes that the phrase is supposed to signal? It turns out it is not the stories Ada tells, or even her love of telling that are at stake. Rather, what is important is the repetitive process of telling as a form of relating to another person. The telling becomes a relationship. When Ada finds someone who can respond to the act of telling by both listening and also telling, then she is "happy." Thus, we have a conclusion that refuses to conclude Ada’s story in any kind of recognizable way. Instead, storytelling becomes a way for characters to establish relationships with each other and, in the process, establish a relationship with the reader. What happened, in the singular sense, is not what is important. The critical point of “Ada” then is not what happened but that something is happen-ing. It is not really a story about Ada. Rather, Stein is using story as a process of relationships between people. Ada is an embodiment (metaphorically speaking) of the process of telling as relating. The emphasis has been placed on the telling rather than what is being told, prohibiting a consuming of knowledge. The story
then is itself a function; it has an effect and it is this effect that we have to pay attention to in order to experience the story. We cannot know, definitely, a singular answer or conclusion to “Ada.” We are forced to stay in the more uncertain process of know/ing that disrupts our expectations, our assumptions and our beliefs about how and why stories are told. In other words, in Stein’s “Ada” we have to pay attention to how the telling works and not only what is being told.

Stein’s telling shows us that narrative and language are much more malleable than often seems possible. Paying attention to Stein’s telling, as “Ada” suggests, and not so much to what is being told, allows for an experiencing of telling and experiential reading of language rather than a consuming of story (reading to get to the answer/conclusion). It is not uncommon for Stein’s readers to cry “she cannot do that” or “she does not make any sense” or “what does this mean?” Paying attention to Stein’s process will help us question and understand from where these demands on texts to “mean” or to “make sense,” and the insistence to “follow the rules,” come. This means I will not be providing definitive readings of Stein’s texts. Such readings contribute to criticism that make her work into a puzzle in need of solving, as if the only reason to read Stein’s texts is to figure them out. Stein critics are notorious for attempting to decode and classify her words into recognizable categories for safer and neater handling. Yet reading Stein’s writing in this way, as mysterious and in need of translation into conventional codes of meaning, only works to mystify not clarify her words. Stein’s writing is so uncategorical
that after nearly a hundred years of criticism, critics are still uncertain what to do with her as her work continues to defy critical agreement. It is not simple, to be sure. With a consistent (and continuous) tendency to make Stein into an iconic figure whose words are eccentric and even crazy but fun and worth quoting nonetheless (or perhaps for that very reason) Stein remains different from other writers who provoke heated critical debate. With her words showing up on television shows (“ElimiDATE” used her “there is no there there” quote to describe one of the female contestant’s breast size on the October 3, 2004 episode), greeting cards, and even coffee mugs (saying “a rose is a rose is rose and that is all there is to it”– note the fourth rose is left out), Stein’s writing is always already complicated by her iconic representation and eccentric (even mythic) reputation. It is not that Stein was a myth or wrote what she wrote in mythic codes. She wrote in the modernist period; she was doing modernist things (defamiliarizing the familiar, questioning narrative forms, and questioning linguistic conventions). Stein herself says that one cannot get outside of one’s one time and that is where one needs to be. And yet, Stein’s commitment to being in the moment, especially in her conception of “the continuous present,” seems to do something with language that did not quite fit (or at least not neatly) with what modernists were doing. Perhaps it is her commitment to making language democratic, as she pays attention and experiences the present, rather than possessing or mastering language that is precisely what makes her work so difficult for her critics to “master.”
As Stein knew, we need new ways of reading in order to understand that these old ways are, in fact, hegemonic and constitutive of our very ways of knowing each other, the world, and ourselves. I re-read Gertrude Stein with this interest. There is a process and making it unstable, de-naturalized, and exposed, matters. This process has everything to do with how and what we think we know and can know. Postmodern deconstructive criticism offers theories of de-centering, de-authorizing, and de-categorizing in order to subvert dominant ways of using and thinking about language, reading, and knowing. By refusing to follow narrative conventions, which insist on linear (beginning, middle, end) narrative progression, Stein does not offer stories that follow the old codes of meaning. Her readers are not allowed to consume her texts in traditional ways. Rather, Stein offers her readers an opportunity to read beyond a particular endpoint. Those readers who seek meaning in the usual places in Stein’s texts (linear structure, plot, character development, among others) will be quickly frustrated. Stein’s offer to her readers to read differently, is important for feminist critical agendas as it encourages open-endedness, resisting mastery of text, and an opportunity to interrogate dominant conventions both within and beyond the text. As Harriet Scott Chessman explains in her 1989 text *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein*, Stein’s work “urg[es] towards an open-ended and speculative responsiveness to her writing, resisting traditional critical claims to objectivity and closure, and allowing ample room for subjectivity” (8). This urging and interrogation of reader’s expectations, moreover, also encourages an
examination of cultural practices of colonization and mastery both within and outside texts. Stein’s work fundamentally resists the notion of mastery in her writing. She troubles her readers’ familiar ways of reading for mastery (conclusiveness), enacting feminist literary, social, and political practices as she displaces the hegemonic hierarchy of explanation, where teller/author is the expert and listener/reader is the trainee.

Stein offers her readers opportunities to become a kind of maker of her text. She leaves her process for the reader on the page. By doing so, she offers a kind collaborative and democratic textual space where she and her readers come together to play, to interact, and be both “patient” and “eager” in order to work through her writing together. Stein speaks to this desire for her readers to go with her and to read “lovingly” early on in The Making of Americans:

Bear it in mind my reader...what I have said always before to you, that this that I write down a little each day here on my scraps of paper for you is not just an ordinary kind of novel...and so my reader arm yourself in every kind of way to be patient and to be eager...And so listen while I tell you all about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please this history of this decent family’s progress. (37)

Here Stein addresses her readers and asks them to go with her and follow her process. In doing so, she positions herself and her reader in a kind of intimate way as she requests that her reader “listen while I tell you about us” (The Making of Americans 37).

In Stein’s work, textual space is both open for experience and becomes experience. Her words conjure up extra-textual experience but also open up possibilities for her reader to have an awareness of having the experience. This is what happens when
one breaks language down. Conventional rules become apparent. Traditional reading practices no longer seem adequate. Common sense is thrown into question. One breaks into language. One begins to experience words as words:

SUPPOSE AN EYES
Suppose it is within a gate which opens is open at the hour of closing summer that is to say it is so.
All the seats are needing blackening. A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.

Go red go red, laugh white.
Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.
Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton.
Little sales of leather and such beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

(Tender Buttons 475)

As I look at this passage, I am struck first by its form. It looks like one of those thought experiments we all have seen in college. Suppose X. In its syllogistic form, the words all seem to line up in a “rational” sequence. But then as I read the words, it quickly becomes obvious they don’t mean in the way I expect them to mean. These words start off addressing me as if I am going to participate in their solution (conclusion). The word “suppose” makes me think, if I follow the passage logically, I should be able to solve the problem that the term “suppose” conjures up for me. It cues me to participate. I do participate. However, as I read the first few lines, I start to stumble. I have to begin again. I work to “make sense” out of how seats in need of blackening could possibly relate to “a white dress is in sign.” I want the white dress to be a sign but it does not say so. It says
“in sign.” How does one in sign? The more I think about the lines and try to make them mean something familiar, the more uncertain I become as a reader. The cues that have encouraged me to read this passage as a syllogism have misguided me. These cues don’t lead me to a recognizable next step. I read “Go red go red, laugh white” and smile. These words chant in my head. There is something so familiar about this line. In fact, it reminds me of my cheerleading days when I spent hours chanting similar lines: “Go red Go white Go Cougars.” This phrase was a cheer we used all of the time. These words allow me to experience them as words. They feel personal and exciting. They do not tell me what they are supposed to mean by the words to which they stand in relation. By the time I get to the word “laugh,” it has enacted itself and I am laughing. But why? What makes these words funny? They don’t seem funny and yet they are. What is the joke? Is it the buildup of words that don’t usually get placed next to one another (and the breaking of grammatical conventions)? That doesn’t seem funny. And yet it is. For me, it is the process my brain goes through to try to make the words make sense and tell a story I am familiar with that is funny. I am aware it does not work. These words do not represent in the ways we expect they will. They are placed on the page but they hardly stay still. They move about. As I read them they can relate or not relate, associate or not associate, with the words near them. Each time I read these words, they can mean something different: “Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.” They move as I try to say what they mean. They are always literally there on the page, of course, but they don’t seem to
say the same thing each time I read them. What happens in my struggle to define, to pin
them down, is that these words enact an experience. What experience? The experience
happens when I let myself imagine cheering or imagine how a collapse in rubbed purr
would be. When I read this line, I imagine a cat rolling around purring. I don’t know why
but I do right now. Later on, I may very well imagine something completely different. I
can experience the text differently because there is no one interpretation that is better than
any other. There is no sense that there is a preferred interpretation. I am not being asked
to make a choice between interpretations at all. All experiences of the passage involve its
reader equally in the text. This line is thus open to infinite possible ways of reading and
knowing it. I know this way at a particular moment. The fact I can know the line
differently the next time I read it, helps me be aware that what is on Stein’s pages is a
process and that I am also involved in this process. I become aware I am experiencing her
words as both text and story. The text as words on a page is there, just sitting there, but
the story is one in which I participate and create as I experience Stein’s words.

It is an opening up of language, or conversely breaking it down, in which Stein’s
texts engage. As I read her words I notice something different happening. I notice that all
of the rules I have been taught about reading, how to read, what to look for, how words
ought to behave, what is “correct” and what is “clear,” don’t seem to hold up in Stein’s
texts. And yet, with all of this de-authorizing and unlawful acting, there is something left.
I am still enjoying, laughing, and interested in Stein’s words. This is, indeed, surprising.
Since Stein is such an “unruly” writer, breaking conventions with every utterance, shouldn’t everything break down? This is the argument her critics have grappled with many times over. The fear of losing all meaning and that everything will fall apart does not seem to materialize if we pay attention to the possibilities Stein’s writing can offer. What we have left, I find, is the possibility to understand that our stories and our ways of telling those stories are not sufficient. They do not tell the whole story. Yes, there are many stories and, as we “progress,” we continue to add more and more stories. However, we keep reading these stories in the similar ways. We continue to insist on hierarchized ways of knowing, reading, seeing, hearing, understanding, and making meaning. Our stories, as diverse and complex as they are, are fundamentally shaped and read in the same way. They follow the same rules.

Stein uses language to subvert or challenge dominant processes of producing meaning by disrupting the move from the lexical to the contextual. We are trained to expect words to mean very specific things and to appear in relation to other words in very particular ways. In other words, words will appear “random” or “out of order” if they are not written in particular relation to one another. This is where context becomes important. The very notion of being “out of order” implies that there is an expected order and signals that there is an impermissible violation. But where does this order come from? Who decides the order? Moreover, how do we know what this order “ought” to look like? These may seem to be ridiculous questions. Who cares as long as it makes sense? But
how do we even come to know what making sense means? Stein interrupts grammatical conventions and expected word order. Readers of the following passage may be quick to claim that it does not make sense:

A PIECE OF COFFEE
More of double.
A place in no new table.
A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal than color than altogether. (*Tender Buttons* 143)

So what happens when Stein disrupts this process of moving from the lexical to the contextual? She messes with our very way of knowing. She messes with language and the production of meaning. She allows for her words to stand on their own. When I read "Dirty is not yellow," I find myself nodding. That makes sense. But then when I get to "The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter," I am not so sure. In fact, if I try to "make sense" of the line with my analytical skills, I quickly grow frustrated. I think this is non-sense. It does not work. But isn’t that the point? How do I know it does not work? I know because I have been trained to associate meaning and words in a very particular way. My training is not working on this passage. Isn’t this interesting? What is happening to disrupt my ability to make sense out of these words? Stein uses common words. There are no tricks here. Stein knows how words are expected to mean and she plays with it, interrogating by way of interruption our cultural insistence on language as neutral and
static. She both allows words to mean as they are expected to mean and also defies their assumed meaning.

By refusing to move from the lexical to the contextual in the conventional manner, she subverts the dominant process of reading. Words, the meanings of which we believe we know exactly, do not have to hold onto these “meanings” in Stein’s texts. They can, but they don’t have to. In other words, we usually believe we know exactly what words mean; however, in Stein’s texts not only do we not know exactly what they mean but it turns out they do not have to mean according to rules. What happens when a writer does not contextualize her words in the conventional sense? She makes practices, which seem normative and neutral, obvious by making us aware we are involved in them. These reading practices do not seem so natural when reading Stein’s texts because they don’t work. What happens? They break down. Stein’s process of using and simultaneously rejecting the most basic grammatical conventions force her readers to attend to each word on the page and each word’s cultural hi/story that it brings along with it. This process of slowing down the reader and asking the reader to pay attention to what and how she writes and s/he reads allows to the reader to, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, “reaffirm the narrative(s) the word is telling or … break into [the narrative] by distorting or deforming, opening the storied words” (Du Plessis 145). She breaks into language. She gets at the very foundation of our access to language and shakes it up.
In “Sentences,” Stein asks her readers to question why they have fixed expectations for writing:

Think of a sentence why should there be a noun. They think of sentences. Why should there be a noun. A noun is the naming of a thing a sentence is why they came. If they came they are here. Thank you. With them they think. (“Sentences” 148)

The noun, as Stein says, names a person place or thing. We generally trust these words to anchor meaning as they name and value them as such. She questions this valuing of the noun and makes her readers think about “why should there be a noun,” after all, “a sentence is why they came.” There is a play on the word “them” going on in this passage. In the sentence “A noun is the naming of a thing a sentence is why they came” Stein is using “they” to refer to nouns. Similarly, “if they came they are here,” “they” seems to refer to the noun. Yet in the final sentence “with them they think,” them/they seems to refer to something else. While there are many ways this sentence could be interpreted, the one that I want to suggest here is that the pronoun, “them,” refers to the sentences that Stein writes, the sentences that are not predicated on the assumption that a sentence must contain a noun. Likewise, the pronoun, “they,” refers to her readers who are given the opportunity to “think” about what and how they read when reading Stein’s sentences.

Late in her career, Stein reflects on her project in an interview with Robert Bartlett Haas: “I like things simple, but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme; otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity”
(Hass 34). As she says, she used everything, paying attention to the many possible ways that words can interact with one another. She writes knowing the complexities of language, the historicity of text, and the cultural politics/conventions of reading. As discussed earlier, Western systems of meaning are produced hierarchically through categories of difference (dichotomies). The need to simplify in order to clarify by exclusion and division (as opposed to inclusion) creates (albeit tidy) categories, which as Stein knows, limit what seems possible. It may be precisely Stein’s willingness (insistence) to “use everything” that has been so difficult for her readers to grasp.

The following passage is taken from “Identity A Poem:”

I am I because my little dog knows me. The figure wanders on alone.
The little dog does not appear because if it did then there would be nothing to fear.
It is not known that anybody who is anybody is not alone and if alone then how can the dog be there and if the little dog is not there is it alone.
The little dog is not alone because no little dog could be alone. If it were alone it would not be there.
So then the play has to be like this.
The person and the dog are there and the dog is there and the person is there and where oh where is their identity, is the identity there anywhere.
I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog. (588-9 in A Stein Reader)

In this passage, Stein is literally working things out. As she “uses everything” she engages in a core epistemological question (identity) of Western philosophical tradition. Rene Descartes’ epistemic investigations, for example, specifically his work in Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), from where his famous Latin phrase “cogito
"Ergo sum" or "I think therefore I am" comes, seems to be invoked in Stein's claim, "I am I because my little dog knows me." Recall that this text is made up of six meditations in which Descartes attempts to doubt literally all beliefs that are not absolutely certain, and then he tries to establish what can be known for sure.

In the second meditation Descartes argues for the certainty of one's own existence, even if all else is in doubt:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me ... the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Descartes 24)

In other words, one's consciousness implies one's existence or, I am I because I know I am I.

As I read Stein's first three sentences of "Identity A Poem": "I am I because my little dog knows me. The figure wanders on alone. The little dog does not appear because if it did then there would be nothing to fear," I am prompted to think about identity, a concept forever troubling in critical discourse. "I am I because my little dog knows me." These words roll around in my head and I soon am thinking about the concept literally. I have a little dog. Do I identify in relation to her? No, I don't think so. Maybe I am already recognizable in the sense there is already something general established about me and this is what my little dog knows? Now I am imagining I am I because I am
recognized as something that my little dog already knows. What might this mean? What is the difference between identity and identifying anyway? On the other hand, perhaps there is some innate beingness /essence that only a little dog might be able to know? I wonder if there is a difference between identity and being. Is there such a thing as "beingness?" I don’t know. Soon I start to question what counts as identity anyway. How do we know that we know anything? How do we know we are who we think we are?

As I experience Stein’s words I realize that Stein is helping me to acknowledge a kind of constructed reality here—she must “be” because her little dog recognizes her. Identity is predicated, it seems, not on an essential essence but on recognition between people (or person-dog in this case) in a kind of exchange. Identity is thus a kind of happening, in the recognition process as opposed to a discovery of some core essence. But even as I make this claim about Stein’s words, I am unsettled because I cannot be sure about it nor do I feel settled by it. So what does it mean if identity is a happening between participants at a particular moment? As I read on, I realize Stein’s prompting is not going to lead me towards any specific answer. In fact, she seems to be grappling with these questions herself. When I read, “The little dog is not alone because no little dog could be alone. If it were alone it would not be there,” it feels to me that she is going through an analytical process. I imagine she and I are working this out together. This is an example of Stein leaving her process on the page. As I read, “The person and the dog
are there and the dog is there and the person is there and where oh where is their identity, is the identity there anywhere,” I realize she is wondering just as am I.

Her process is right here in front of me. However, when I look at this passage, I cannot help but think of its syllogistic form. Stein has written the text to cue me into it as such. She sets me up, as it were, and pushes me to approach the text in a familiar “logical” manner. This is not unlike Derrida’s argument in regards to metaphysics where he suggests that the process of deconstruction is vexed in the sense that we must always use the very thing that we wish to deconstruct. In “Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida calls attention to the fact that despite deconstructionists desire to “decenter the center” and rework our most basic notions of how meaning is made and what counts as knowledge, there can never be a total rejection of the what and how we know. We are always calling upon conventions and rules for explanation. We must then, as Derrida says, use what we know to do something else. Or, as Virginia Woolf says in her essay “Modern Fiction,” we must use what we have and at the same time “put the emphasis elsewhere” (in Narrative/theory 16). I read Stein’s cueing as enacting Derrida’s theory. This is Stein using language with all of its complicated histories deliberately, making her words do something else. Her disruption happens within the very conventions that she is challenging. I get to the line in “Identity A Poem,” “So then the play has to be like this,” and I am ready for “the answer.” However, the answer, “I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog,” does not act like the
answer my training has primed me to search for. In fact, I get to this point and I laugh. What does this mean? The build up of these lines prompts me to look for an ending. However, just as in “Ada,” Stein offers a kind of concluding that does not end definitively.

These words again roll around in my head as I read the line over and over. I imagine two dogs standing next to one another and then the dogs being pulled further apart until they are no longer in visible relation with one another. As I picture the dogs moving further and further apart, I enjoy myself. I am completely inside the text. I have broken into language. Language does not dictate how I imagine the dogs. Yes, I imagine small furry quadruped mammals, but there is no correct way to say definitively what “I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog” means in the totalizing way we are taught to read. I am enjoying imagining how these words might mean in relation to each other, at this very moment. I am part of the process. I create and re-create my experience with Stein’s words. I am aware that I am making meaning. There is no assuming going on here. Nothing must make sense in this enjoyable moment. It just does. As soon as I try to defend my “interpretation,” however, I stop my process of breaking into language and revert back to a conventional user of language, and Stein’s words no longer make sense to me in the same way.

It is only while I am willing to be flexible and play within my reading of the text that I am breaking into language, which is why it is useful to go through these kinds of
readings that do not conclusively insist on what Stein is doing. I am going with Stein. I work to resist concluding what Stein does in a conclusive way. My readings work to emphasize how she does what she does. To emphasize the “what” of Stein’s work is to dissect it and to attempt to tell the “truth” about what is really happening in a text, does not work with Stein. Rather than assuming she has a code to break and searching for the “real” meaning, I try to walk with her. As I do this, I find I become aware of language in a way I might not otherwise. I call this a process of becoming aware of language and my expectations of how language ought to function and how words ought to behave to make meaning, breaking into language.

When Stein cues and then subverts the very cue she gives, she complicates our relation to language. Whether her reader responds with excitement or frustration, she disrupts the process of making meaning. That is, Stein’s words make the reader realize that as they read there is a process of making meaning and that they are involved in that process. Reading Stein is an uneasy process and as you become aware of your uneasiness you begin to question your reading practices. It is thus in this process of experiencing tensions between your expectations of how language ought to behave and how Stein’s words deviate from those expectations that pushes you to begin questioning where your uneasiness comes from. The moment you begin to question your expectations and become aware of your uneasiness with Stein’s words, you have broken into language. The uneasiness of Stein’s words is a happening, a process, rather than something that
occurs only upon his/her reading; therefore, as one reads and experiences an awareness of
the tensions between conventional understandings of language and Stein’s use of
language, one is breaking into language. At these moments Stein’s writing renders the
limits of conventions visible.

To destabilize language is to inquire into the ideological function of text and
textuality and to explore the relationship between ways of knowing and how we know.
Stein uses modes of telling through fragmentation, inclusion, repetition within difference,
beginning again and again, and these modes must be read in tension with grand narrative
structures of telling as complete systems of explanations. Grand narratives are stories that
are always constructed by and for dominant culture and seem to be totalizing. Yet even as
complete as they may seem, they are stories that are retold and have the potential to be
told differently. What happens when conventions are broken down and language is
broken into? When language is broken into, forms of speaking open up. Access is
available in new ways for different kinds of subjects. Conversations of all sorts become
possible. This has everything to do with who can be heard and how one is heard.

What do reading practices have to do with speaking and hearing. In her seminal
essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argues, because subaltern women receive their
discursive identities within always already historically determinate systems of
representations, their speech acts can be heard only through those modes of speaking
which operate in accordance with the rules of the dominant. “Subaltern women” is a term
Spivak uses to signify a spectrum of disempowered women within particular political systems. The idea is that subaltern women can only be represented within and through the “eyes” of the political systems to which they belong. Subaltern is used to emphasize the systematic hierarchical processes in which voices are relegated and meaning is constructed. Thus, what disempowered subjects say and what is heard of them are not equivalent. The point then is not that subalterns are physically unable to speak, but rather they won’t be heard by the dominant ear. Stein’s words, read in a culture that is doggedly loyal to the belief that language functions statically, objectively, and representationally, are heard similarly to that of Spivak’s subaltern. This is not to say Stein is a subaltern or Stein’s speech is subaltern speech. Rather, like Spivak’s account of the subalterns, Stein’s words are often heard in terms of dominant reading practices (non-sense, etc.) rather than as disruptive, inspirational or enjoyable. It is not unusual for her readers to call her “crazy” or claim that her writing is “unconscious” which are, of course, ways of “othering” her (her “crazy” or “irrational” prose is chalked to be the result of her being a woman). While Spivak is calling on identity categories (“subaltern women,” etc.) as a way of investigating how and why some people cannot be heard, as it were, I am saying that such silencing starts on the discursive level and then identities are constructed and called upon as ways of marking the silenced. Investigating how and why Stein’s words are heard as esoteric, annoying, meaningless by many can help us question discourse and how discursive productions are fundamentally ideological and hierarchical. After all,
Spivak is asking the question “Can the subaltern speak?” as one way of deconstructing cultural systems of meaning and unmasking the ideological functions of language that allow some speakers to be heard while rendering others silent against dominant discourse.

Stein says in *Lecture’s in America*, “You listen as you know” (169). I read this line as Stein commenting on how her words are heard/read/received in accordance with conventional rules and regulations. Further commenting on the reception of her work, Stein has Alice say in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “she did not understand why since the writing was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work” (32-33). Stein knew that her words often could not be heard because of the ways we insist on reading them. Stein, often her own best critic, understood why her “complex simplicity” has been received as unlawful. The range of critical assessments of Stein’s unlawfulness is impressive. Ranging from, for example, Cudworth Flint’s characterization of Stein as a “sorceress” and “a person from whom we must escape” in his 1936 article “Contemporary Criticism” (212) to Walter Sorell’s assertion of Stein, in his 1975 critical study *Three Woman*, as a linguistic law breaker who is like a father’s rebellious daughter (106). According to Sorell, “grammar stands for law and order, for the acceptance of the past experiences of those who teach us this system of symbols” (106). Stein refuses this “acceptance” as she “uses everything” and writing with “lively words.” There is nothing inherently difficult about her words. As I have already said,
Stein uses the most common of words. But they don’t show up as meaning anything, or rather they show up as making non-sense, within the dominant structure of reading practices. So if we ask ourselves why Stein’s words are postulated as coded, secret, and nonsensical, perhaps we will find there is nothing coded, or secret, or nonsensical about them. Words can only misbehave and writers can only be marked as “unlawful” if in fact there are laws to follow. There is nothing natural about laws. As Sorell’s characterization of Stein as a father’s rebellious daughter signals, to reject “law and order” is to reject patriarchal authority. Why read Gertrude Stein? Perhaps we will learn something about those laws and the system in which those laws operate.

Much has been said about and done with Gertrude Stein’s work. However, rarely is Stein simply read in her own right. There has been a consistent critical drive to characterize Stein’s work as a giant jigsaw puzzle, which critics must piece together. Her words are read as secretive and private. The challenge for the critic is imagined in terms of “breaking the code” and concluding with the answer. Of course, the answer is “proof” of what Stein’s words really mean or, just as often, what they don’t mean. Such critical accounts often seem to take very different approaches to Stein’s texts and yet end up doing similar work. Stein’s critics often look into some sort of psychological realm of human nature or look to other art forms. These moves to make sense of her words outside of language, rather than reading what she wrote, inevitably end up creating a project for Stein and then concluding that Stein fails to perform this project adequately.
In her 1983 text, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*, Marianne DeKoven locates Stein’s language in the realm of the primordial and presymbolic. She then constructs an elaborate argument, which insists “the key” to understanding Stein’s writing is to “reveal” that it operates on the level of the presymbolic, and is thus antipatriarchal. For DeKoven, experimental writing is, by its very structure, presymbolic. Following Lacan’s use of the notion “The-Law-of-the-Father,” DeKoven assumes that since the presymbolic is pre-patriarchal it is also necessarily anti-patriarchal (*A Different Language* 133). “Presymbolic” is a term DeKoven uses to build on Lacan’s idea that we enter into culture through symbolic systems. Lacan argues that these symbolic systems are fundamentally patriarchical because this is the point where “The-Law-of-the-Father” becomes operational. When I use the term “The-Law-of-the-Father,” I am specifically referring to the way Lacan names the rules of language the “Law-of-the-Father” (Lacan, 106). What is important to understand is that this phrase, Law-of-the-Father, for Lacan, becomes a structuring principal of the symbolic order. Submission to the rules of language itself (The-Law-of-the-Father) is required in order to enter into the Symbolic order. Thus, in order to become a speaking subject, one must obey the laws and rules of language. DeKoven understands this to mean that anything happening before this moment (the entering into the Law-of-the-Father) in the presymbolic stage, is necessarily prepatriarchal. It follows for DeKoven that if something is pre-patriarchal then “the underlying force behind her
[Stein’s] experimental writing throughout” is “the anti-patriarchal” (*A Different Language* 133). DeKoven concludes that experimental writing, with Stein’s being an example, functions to transform patriarchy “at the most fundamental or radical level of the structures of language which enable meaning” because experimental writing does not follow the rules of the symbolic system (*A Different Language* 150). What DeKoven is doing here is using Lacanian theory to try to get “before” the conventions and the rules that structure narrative practices. She argues that experimental writing can only happen outside of the patriarchal symbolic linguistic system. Going “pre” or “before” patriarchy via Lacanian theory is appealing for DeKoven because it seems to open up the possibility of using language without the hegemonic rules. It seems to be a way to make Stein’s words, as an experimental writer, mean outside the patriarchal linguistic systems. However, what happens when she does this is she accepts assumptions that undermine what she sets out to do.

The problem is that nothing has been done to deconstruct the very categories which construct and maintain patriarchal ideology in the first place. In fact, in her efforts to make Stein’s words mean something specifically antipatriarchal, DeKoven has recuperated and reinscribed the binaries upon which patriarchy depends; Man *thinks* and Woman *feels*. She has thus done the very thing she set out to break down. In the process, she has read *through* Stein’s words. She relegates Stein’s words to the level of the unconscious, a fundamentally “female” space as opposed to conscious male space, a
division which DeKoven does not question. In DeKoven's account, Stein's words can only express in the reactionary sense. Her words then cannot mean anything in their own right. This reading of Stein has everything to do with characterizing her as a user (usually an incompetent one), not an agent, of language. The language DeKoven allows Stein is below consciousness. It can only be primordial. This recourse to the "unconscious" is one that moves Stein out of the active, logical, and rational agent of language. DeKoven's reading makes Stein's words, as well as any experimental writer's words, into something secretive and private and thus always already only her/their own.

In the critical mission to decode Stein's words and to give a conclusive account of what they "mean," critics have consistently attempted to locate Stein's work in relation to the plastic arts. Such an attempt may be found in Wendy Steiner's text 1978 Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein. Steiner works to show that Stein's written portraits are the literary equivalents of painted portraits. Steiner performs a comparative analysis in which she tries to explain Stein's "nonrepresentational" or "abstract" writing through cubist geometrical painting. She wants to say Stein's words are nonrepresentational in the same way cubist painting is nonrepresentational (136). Stein referred to her writing in tactile terms and spoke about her work in relation to the plastic arts. In an interview with Robert Bartlett Haas Stein said, "I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a relationship between the word
and the thing seen (Hass 25). Thus it is not Steiner’s idea of connecting Stein’s writing to the plastic arts that is necessarily problematic, but rather what she does with this idea.

The problem Steiner runs into is words, unlike other creative materials (paint, for example), always operate within a culturally inscribed system of meaning. As Monique Wittig points out in her 1984 essay “The Trojan Horse” no one expects color, sound, paint or clay to mean on their own where as words, even as “raw material” are expected to mean (“The Trojan Horse” 49). In the attempt to read Stein’s words as “raw material” in order to make them available as plastic substances such as paint or clay, one inevitably gets trapped into an attempt to force the separation of form and content. And as Wittig tells us, “in words, form and content cannot be disassociated, because they partake of the same form, the form of a word, a material form” (“The Trojan Horse” 49). This is where Steiner gets into trouble. She attempts such a separation. Steiner cannot make the function of words and the function of paint logically equivalent. Words come “ready-made” with expectations, while paint (for example) comes neutrally and awaits the inscription of meaning. Stein works to free words from exactly this context. But Steiner is unable to consider the possibility of words as being anything other than associative and referential. For Steiner, words must always be signs. She writes, “For as we have seen, literary signs cannot be totally isolated and still refer to their subject” (159). She then defines Stein’s work in terms of lack: “Her écriture-objet gradually lost every link to its subject until it ceased to signify anything in the proper sense of the word” (159). This
reading works to contain and restrain Stein. Isn’t it interesting that Steiner declares Stein’s work as nonsense because her words do not abide by the very rules that Stein is challenging? Steiner thus says, “the problem arose from her overextension of her medium,” and then declares Stein a failure who “insisted on trying the impossible” (160). Steiner continues: “Her intransigence, however, should not be too harshly criticized, for the attempted translation of pictorial norms into literary ones, like all her failed experiments, reveals a great deal” (160). It is revealing that Steiner refers to Stein’s projects as “failed experiments.” “Failed” as opposed to success? What counts as an “experiment” in writing anyway? Evidently, even the experimental is expected to follow the rules.

This project seems to be driven by Steiner’s desire to “rescue” Stein’s work from the accusation of meaninglessness by translating it into something else. This reading assumes Stein’s words are meaningless in their own right. It also makes Stein out as doing something “impossible,” as Steiner concludes, and thus makes it seem that Stein is not really doing anything at all. Moreover, Steiner’s reading of Stein covers up the fact that “the attempted translation” is not Stein’s (160, my italics). Steiner is the one who is doing the translating. Since Steiner cannot make her project for Stein work, she has to denounce Stein as a “failure.”

Stein is not the failure in DeKoven’s and Steiner’s critical accounts. These critics’ desire to go outside of language for their critical conclusions reveals the hold language
has on us. Both DeKoven and Steiner try to find meaning outside of language to explain what Stein’s words mean. The problem is that Stein does not try to do something outside of language. She does not invent language. She uses it with all of its complexities and its cultural history. The critical drive to go outside of language to search for an explanation of what Stein “means,” does nothing to help us understand what Stein is doing with and in language. It does nothing to question from where our demands and expectations of how language ought to operate, and how meaning ought to be made, emanate.

Let’s look at how Stein tells a story in a narrative structure we can more easily recognize. I am particularly interested in the way “Melanctha,” the middle of the three stories in Three Lives, works to disrupt narrative structure. Three Lives is generally thought to be one of Stein’s more “readable” texts. However, many readers of the text do not consider it an “easy read.” As we have seen before, Stein cues us to expect a particular kind of storytelling and then challenges this expectation. The title “Melanctha,” as does the title “Ada,” cues us to think this is a story about Melanctha. We are set up to expect to be told Melanctha’s story. And indeed the story begins in a fairly “traditional” way. Early in the text, we learn all about Melanctha. Her story, as it were, is being told to us. Stein gives us a few pages of “telling” that fit with our expectations of storytelling. We learn about Melanctha and her friend Rose. We learn about where the two women met and the story seems to be unfolding in a fairly predictable manner: “Rose Johnson and Melanctha Herbert had first met one night at church. Rose Johnson did not care much
for religion. She had not enough emotion to be really roused by a revival" (48). However, the majority of the text does not tell us the rest of this story. It does not follow a recognizable trajectory. Instead, Melanctha’s story is happening as we read. It is not being recalled but rather it is being created and re-created temporally in the present and thus always in motion. The emphasis is on what is happening to, with, and within Melanctha Herbert in the moment. Stein says in “Composition as Explanation” that this story disrupts the conventional sense of time in narrative: “I wrote a negro story called Melanctha. In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future” (Three Lives 16). Stein is telling us that she intended to make “Melanctha” a disruptive story in terms of temporal structure and content, hence the constant recurring and beginning.

Melanctha Herbert is presented as an unreliable storyteller because she cannot tell a “whole” story:

Some man would learn a good deal about her in the talk, never altogether truly, for Melanctha all her life did not know how to tell a story wholly. She always, and yet not with intention, managed to leave out big pieces which make a story very different, for when it came to what happened and what she had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha never could remember right. (Three Lives 100)

Isn’t it interesting that the character who has trouble telling the whole story and does not claim to be a “thinker” is not the one who struggles with “knowing?” The “knower” and “rational thinker” Jeff Campbell is the one whose thinking ends up frustrating him rather
than providing him insight. Melanctha has trouble telling and Jeff has trouble “knowing” her because she does not tell her “whole” story. The ongoing struggle between the two characters seems to be rooted in Jeff’s desire for Melanctha to tell him who she is really. Jeff’s expectation of telling is to achieve knowledge and his goal is to be “told” while Melanctha’s telling, as is Ada’s, is one of relating. Melanctha’s telling thus does not lend itself to telling a story that Jeff recognizes as such. Melanctha uses telling to relate whereas Jeff uses telling to know. He strives to know her, but she does not offer him the kind of story he is looking for. He claims many times to want to know her, but, at the same time, he seems to learn nothing from all of the dialogue that they share. Lots of telling takes place, but it does not satisfy Jeff. Rather, Jeff desires certitude where knowing becomes an endpoint.

‘Melanctha Herbert,’ began Jeff Campbell, ‘I certainly feel this time I know you, I certainly do know little, real about you. You see, Melanctha, it’s like this way with me […] I feel so really near to you, and you certainly have got an awful wonderful, strong kind of sweetness. I certainly would like to know for sure Melanctha, whether I got anything to be afraid for. I certainly did think once, Melanctha, I knew something about all kinds of women. I certainly know now really, how I don’t know anything sure at all about you, Melanctha, though I been with you so long, and so many times for whole hours with you, and I like so awful much to be with you, and I can always say anything I am thinking to you.’ (Three Lives 80, 81)

A reader’s training is to rise above the words and to see them in terms of associating with one another in order to reveal that the extra-textual meaning may be the reason “Melanctha” often feels “annoying” and “frustrating.” The way we have learned
to read through language, as in looking through and beyond is constantly interrupted in this story. As soon as one attempts to pin down the word “know” and say how it is being used in this passage in any kind of singular or definitive way, the meaning changes. The word “knowing,” through Jeff’s ongoing struggle to know Melanctha, enacts itself. As I read this passage, I enjoy myself. It is fun to see and hear “knowledge” being tossed around, being unstable, being questioned. By the time I get to, “I certainly would like to know for sure Melanctha,” the word “know” throws itself into question. The relation between language and thinking also gets called into question. Knowing, and by derivation common sense and certainty become suspect. If something is known it is supposed to be certain (notice how often Jeff says the word “certainty”) and thus an endpoint. With Melanctha’s story “happening” as we read, knowing is itself a process. We know in an ongoing time-sense way rather than the conventional knowing that comes after reflection, after consideration, and after reasoning. As I continue on in my reading of this passage, pretty soon I am thinking about knowledge in the relational sense. I consider how these characters know themselves and each other. I begin to know, or at least I think that I know, that Jeff’s knowing is not as solid as he believes it to be. His knowing, as mine, is a process. In fact, it is a never-ending process. This is precisely the problem for Jeff. He refuses the verb and demands the noun, as it were. He strives for “progress” (Dr. Campbell the Scientist) but finds himself engaged in a process that does not progress in the linear way that he desires. Jeff Campbell presumably continues to struggle with his
knowing since there is no “ending” for him in the text. He is not written out. We do not hear about what happens to him. Rather, Jeff never finishes.

The characters in Melanctha move in ways they are not supposed to move. Jeff Campbell does not move into a definitive conclusion: he is left but not finished. Rose is present at the beginning and again at the ending of the text. She reappears, however, as if she had never left. She is still “scolding” Melanctha as she was in the beginning of the story; “Melanctha, I certainly have got to tell you, you ain’t right to act with that kind of feller” (Three Lives 123). Again we are told about Rose and her loss of her baby. The text begins “Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth. Melanctha Herbert who was Rose Johnson’s friend, did everything that any woman could” (Three Lives 47). Only three pages from the conclusion we are told, “Rose had a hard time bringing her baby to its birth and Melanctha did everything that any woman could” (Three Lives 134). Rose’s character has not developed. Her relationship with Melanctha has not developed or changed. This is because the story is Melanctha’s story but not Melanctha’s story as we expect. The focus is not on what happens to Jeff or to Rose. These characters are secondary to Melanctha. They matter only insofar as they are part of Melanctha’s ongoing experience.

This main character is marked immediately by her name also being the title of the story, “Melanctha.” However, Melanctha’s story is not a telling of her but rather an experience-ing her. We experience her through her very process of being. In “Melanctha”
as in “Ada,” the story moves through telling. However, telling is a happening rather than a recollection. These texts are both structured around the act of telling and not what is being told. It is not a telling that comes from an act of remembering. Remembering is not the kind of telling that Stein is doing. Stein says in Lectures in America, “[T]he making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or anything,” and “No matter how complicated anything is, if it is not mixed up in remembering there is no confusion” (175, 179 respectively). Let’s look at an example of the way both the concept and the word “remember” itself are massaged in “Melanctha:”

‘You see Melanctha, it certainly is this way with you, it is, that you ain’t ever got any way to remember right, what you been doing, or any body else that has been feeling with you. You certainly Melanctha never can remember right, when it comes what you have done and what you think happens to you.’ ‘It certainly is all easy for you Jeff Campbell to be talking. You remember right, because you don’t remember nothing till you get home with your thinking that everything is all over, but I certainly don’t think much ever of that kind of way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell. I certainly do call it remembering right Jeff Campbell, to remember right just when it happens to you, so you have a right kind of feeling not to act the way you always been doing, then you go home Jeff Campbell and you begin with your thinking, and then it certainly is very easy for you to be good and forgiving with it. No, that ain’t me, the way of remembering Jeff Campbell, not as I can see it not to make people always suffer, waiting for your certainly to get to do it. Seems to me like Jeff Campbell, I never could feel so like a man was low and to be scorning of him, like that day in the summer, when you threw me off just because you got one of those fits of your remembering. No, Jeff Campbell, its real feeling every moment when it is needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering.’ (Three Lives 107)
As I read this passage, what I remember in this passage is the complexity of the sentences and the raw emotions they express and also produce in me. I have the sense that life is in motion as I read the words. I remember myself enjoying reading and being extremely attentive to the text, but I do not remember exactly what is said. If I go back and read the passage carefully, I can certainly remember some of the lines, but I begin to struggle with them. The text seems to be actively working against me when I try to remember it. Equally frustrating, the more I focus on figuring out what the words mean, the more I stumble over them. I find myself skipping over words and having to go back and begin again. The word “remembering” enacts itself. I try to remember. Remembering always requires stopping and that is exactly what I find myself doing. I am stopping as I try to remember what I have just read. This is always what happens when one remembers, but as I read this passage I become aware I am stopping and that I am forced to start over again. If the text pushes me to begin again, then how will I ever make it to the end? This is a question many readers ask when they read Stein’s theories about beginning again and again. Perhaps we need in turn to question why is it so important for us to get to the end? From where does this expectation emanate? It has come to seem natural to go from start to finish. “Melanctha” interrogates this belief by its very construction.

When I look at the form of the passage above, the word “remember” is everywhere. And yet, when I try to say definitely how “remember” is acting, it is already
elsewhere. My academic training encourages me to dissect the paragraph and pinpoint the ways “remember” is used. However, when I attempt such a move, my analytical tools fail me. As soon as I try to grab hold of the word and define it, it slips, as it were, through my fingers. Remembering moves around and, in fact, moves me through the passage. On the one hand, the word “remember” leads me through the complex dialogue. However, “remember” also circles around in such a way that it prohibits me from reading from start to finish. The word disrupts my reading. It makes me pay attention to its shifting, its turning, and its winding. Words are supposed to exist only in relation to each other. But remembering in this passage is doing more work than this. It doesn’t mean the same way or in relation to the same kinds of words in each of its instances in the passage. My attention shifts with its shifting. I watch how this utterance moves and I listen to how it sounds as it moves.

Stein makes words do things that fundamentally challenge our reading practices. Consequently, because she challenges our reading practices, she does not use words in the ways that they are “supposed” to be used in conventional terms. Stein’s words do not depend upon hegemonic binaries that allow words to mean only in oppositional relations. As we have seen in earlier readings, Stein’s words can mean in many ways. Her words can mean in relation to each other, but they do not have to do so. She challenges the rules, but she does not disregard them. She is not a language chemist, as it were, mixing and stirring words to create something altogether a new. However, this description is not
an uncommon reading of her. In Cudworth F. Flint’s words, “One must regard Miss Stein as something of a sorceress...a person from whom one must escape“(65). Where does this comment come from? Why does Flint find Stein’s voice so profoundly dangerous? In a culture structured by binary oppositions, where meaning or unity necessarily depends on essential difference, and where everything must mean in relation to normative rules and practices, it is not surprising Gertrude Stein’s work is received as threatening and coded. Critics who approach her words as coded and thus cryptic inevitably read Stein as not doing anything at all. Flint writes, “One wonders why Miss Stein has embarked on this unpromising endeavor” (66). What makes her endeavor seem “unpromising” to many is the belief that Stein is only a rule breaker. In this view, Stein becomes an embodiment of lack. It is easier, apparently, to say Stein does nothing of importance than to listen to her disruption. Her breaking down of language and the destabilization of the rules that follows from this breakdown are often seen as disruption for its own sake and therefore not of value.

What more can one do than to make visible the construction of this mandate of convention in terms of how meaning is made and to show how the mandate shapes what we think we know? I find it interesting how our culture values some modernists such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Earnest Hemingway who have called into question language and narrative structure and our relation to these structures in the ways that we
think about ourselves and our world and our reality; yet Gertrude Stein’s disruption of these linguistic rules and regulations continues to be understood as only her own.

We have seen in “Ada” there seems to be a crossing over between “portrait and story” and “Melanctha” does not quite fit the genre of narrative, but The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is an obvious assault on genre. Why does it matter that Stein disrupts genre? We have been examining how Stein moves away from stable binaries in her uses of words, but now we see her also moving away from a stable narrator. Why include genre in a discussion about how meaning and language work? Genre circumscribes language and meaning. Genre is perhaps the most overarching of rules that tell us how discourse, narratives, and meaning ought to function and thus is the essential backbone that structures our reading practices. Genre works against opening up possibilities of reading practices. It works against know-ing and experiencing language outside of dominant conventions. Genre provides us assurance that even the most fragmented utterances can create recognizable patterns of meaning. In the end, the fragments can and must add up to truth. Stein’s interruption of genre disrupts such certainties. In The Autobiography, she pushes her reader to yet another level of radical uncertainty. Not only are we uncertain about what is being told, as we are in “Ada” and “Melanctha,” but also now we are also of who is doing the telling.

The last few lines of the book reveal it is Stein, not Alice, telling Alice’s story:

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, 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. (Selected Writings 208)

If we don’t know who tells the story, then how can we know if a story is “true?” The author is the source of meaning; at least, that is the conventional way of seeing it. After all, it is the Author’s story. But what happens if the teller is not as stable and thus not as reliable as we thought? The telling that happens in The Autobiography challenges authority on the authorial level.

In “Melanctha,” we have telling and remembering that become actions on the page. This telling gives us nothing certain. While perhaps frustrating, it is understandable, or at least forgivable, for most readers since we know that “Melanctha” is a fictional story. We do not expect truth from that kind of story. However, in The Autobiography, we seem to be getting the real story. This is “Alice’s” story. Telling and remembering are enacted in a way with which we are familiar. We think, at least, we are finding out something certain and reliable. After all, it is an autobiography. It turns out, however, what we are being told and what is being remembered is some uncertain combination of both and neither Toklas and Stein. We cannot adjudicate who is telling or if either of them is really “telling.” However, even though Stein outs herself or perhaps because she outs herself, Stein’s story works. People read it. People enjoy it. The final words quoted above act, in some sense, as a solution. We now know her “secret,” readers may momentarily believe. It does not take long, however, for this text’s telling to make its reader uncertain, even more uncertain than “Ada” and “Melanctha.” We know that those
are Stein’s stories. But what kind of story is *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas?* We are right back to where we started. Ironically, this moment of “truth” makes us doubt not only *whose* memories are told but also if they are memories at all, thus subverting itself as a possible sense of “solution” in its very utterance.

Why do we value stories when we think that they are authentic autobiographies and accept them as true stories so easily? Alice’s story is only a lie when we find out that she isn’t doing the telling. Until Stein’s concluding confession, we do not question the story or at least no more than we would question any other autobiographical story. We have been schooled to believe that the genre of autobiography is stable, truthful, and authentic. This genre acts as if it merely reports the reality of its teller’s experiences, but really it is always a kind of fiction. Even as post-structuralism continues to interrogate this idea that a whole story can be told factually unaltered, arguing that all stories narrate selectively, we still cherish our autobiographies as authentic spaces of true experience.

In *Narration,* Stein tells us that it is actually the fiction that we enjoy and desire.

> Think of Defoe, he tried to write Robinson Crusoe as if it were exactly what did happen and yet after all he is Robinson Crusoe and Robinson Crusoe is Defoe and therefore after all it is not what is happening it is what is happening to Robinson Crusoe that makes what is exciting every one. (45)

Robinson Crusoe is of course the fiction. Stein is saying that we want a story. We don’t want an autobiography or, at least, we want autobiographies and biographies in the form of stories. It is the fictional character to which we have listened that we have engaged
with all along. It is a fictional character whose telling we believed. In both cases, Defoe’s and Stein’s, we have given credence to the stories because they are set up as *true* stories. What does it mean if we think that we are excited by the true story, but really we are excited by is the story itself? The fact that we think it is more exciting when it is *true*, Stein tells us, is really an illusion. It is the story that *we tell ourselves* to ensure we can differentiate between fact and fiction. How does this need to differentiate between fact and fiction play out in terms of how we think about meaning and how meaning gets made? If we consider the genre of fiction in light of what Stein tells us here, we can see an underlying contradiction that structures our reading practices. We demand fiction to tell us the truth, but it is supposed to tell the truth by lying. What many readers find frustrating with “Melanctha” is that, for all of the fictitious telling that goes on (lying), there does not seem to be any “truth” at the end. There is no recognizable solution or answer. There is no payoff, so to speak. We expect the story to have some underlying truth. We have learned that story is “a free narration, not necessarily factual but truthful in character...[it] gives us human nature in its boldest outlines; history, in its individual details” (Horne, 23-24).

All stories are selections. We know this. Fiction is a time-honored venue for telling truth. Readers love literary symbolism and metaphor. The stories richest in such figurative language are considered the “best” by conventional standards and can be found in our much celebrated and cherished canons. What is loved about such figurative
techniques is that we believe they lead us towards the transcendence, the transcendence of Truth/Answer/Ending. They are methods by which selections are pieced together to make a whole or to give us the hidden message, the closure, the solution. Fiction in this sense leads to nonfiction, so it is thought. However, as many of Stein's critics and readers alike reveal in their frustration with her writing, there are very particular ways that fiction must be used. Authors must follow conventional standards in making their selections so that all of the parts come together to form the "right" kind of "whole." After all, if the right selections are not made we cannot get to the anticipated endpoint or answer. Our need to differentiate between fact and fiction then comes from the conventions of our reading practices. These practices are structured to have us believe that we can know the whole truth. We thus fool ourselves into thinking that we are getting a stable and true meaning by a stable and true story because we are already schooled even at the lexical level that meaning is transparent and stable and that it is whole and possible.

So what has happened in this "autobiography"? Stein appeals to us, knowing that we will find her telling more believable if we think that it is a true story. The fear that we may not be able to differentiate between fact and fiction is what Stein taps into. From the first moment that we doubt that this is Alice giving Alice's story, she problematizes the assumption that we know the difference between reality and fiction and thus knowledge itself. That is, if we don't know what is "real," then we do not have a way to know (or get to know) reality, which we are schooled to believe is possible. Knowledge, it is thought, can only be produced and re-produced if there is something stable, objective, real, and
true to know. Knowing, it turns out, must follow traditional modes of telling. Thus, telling the truth of one’s experience, as Stein demonstrates in *The Autobiography*, may not be heard as true (or even real) if it does not follow conventional narrative structure.

Looking back at Stein after semiotics has already happened, we now have a vocabulary for understanding that language is a system of signs and that, even at the lexical level, there is an arbitrary but desired relationship between words and concepts (signifier and signified). As linguist-semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure has shown us, language means hegemonically. There is nothing natural or innate about the relations between words and things. However, we have been schooled to believe that the word-concept relation is supposed to be stable so that a concept cannot, for instance, “wander” and “hook” up with another word. By putting words on the page that do not mean in the ways that we expect them to, Stein calls attention to language’s constructedness and reveals that the seemingly fixed relationship between signifier and signified is actually a tangible one (one that can and ought to be played with). As Stein confronts us with this playing, making clear that these relations are arbitrary, she shows us that the tension between fact and fiction and our desire to know the “real” or the “true,” is already happening at the lexical level of language.

“Common sense” is only common to those who have similar access and experience with/in language. Understanding, it turns out, means constructing, making common sense. That is, what we understand as making sense is always filtered through and bounded by cultural ideology. In other words, language is bounded by culture and the
way cultures determine what counts as real and meaningful, subsequently presented as if
neutral or natural. The “neutral” systems of making meaning must be exposed as
culturally (and hegemonically) produced. What we think we know for certain are only
selections of possible know-ing. This requires us, as feminist theorist Mary Daly says, to
change “the nouns of knowledge into the verbs of knowing” (11). That is, if culture
determines what counts as meaning, revealing that language is not neutral, as Stein’s
process shows us, then we can begin to understand that what we think of as knowledge, a
noun, is actually something that is continually in the process of being made, a verb. This
is why Stein insists on the ability to “use everything” and limit nothing. What is at stake
in “using everything” is to understand that making sense and making meaning are never neutral and that making knowledge is an ongoing process of constructing. There is
nothing natural or innately fundamental about meaning, knowledge, or the systems of
language which we use to create and understand our world. Rather, these are cultural
processes that are structured by conventions and traditions, cultural rules which work to
limit possibilities. Stein “uses everything” in order to write parts of speech back into all of their possibilities.

What we get with Gertrude Stein’s texts is possibility. Possibility is, of
course, all we ever really have. What is expressed as meaningful, truthful, and conclusive
in dominant culture is possibility that has been produced as fact, by “I’s” who matter.
That is, the voices that are heard as expressing meaning or making great works are the
voices that speak most closely to the dominant ear. Gertrude Stein certainly does not
speak closely to the dominant ear. Her words, as I have worked to show in this text do not follow (or at least do not always follow) the structure that we recognize by conventional standards as “correct.” At the same time, however, Stein’s words are our words and vice versa. She does not create words. Her words function and play within the English language’s system of signs. The fact that she uses the simplest of words and allows them to do “the impossible” only reveals the hegemonic ways that language is manipulated to make some possibilities in language necessary and others unlawful. Perhaps what we get from Gertrude Stein is the possibility of understanding that everything is merely a possibility and nothing, no matter how true or factual it feels to us, is ever really certain.

This opening up of language is promising because it allows for greater interaction and possibility which is, as I have argued, the key to re-reading Stein. Instead of pinning her down, reading for definitive interpretations, I have worked to allow the openness because it engages the reader in the process of making meaning as process, enacting the deconstructive project, as it were. Stein makes language so multiple, as she puts it all there on the page “using everything,” and yet while such an overwhelming sense of possibility could otherwise become a paralytic moment(s), this multiplicity becomes playful—she turns it into play. Stein’s opening up of language can be terrifying for readers simply because to open something up without concluding it is to construct an evolution and, in turn, a revolution— a revolution of tradition, rules, conventions and, in the broadest sense, normalized ways of knowing. The fact that Stein is a problem for critics (and many of her readers) tells us nothing about Stein and everything about
ourselves. Critics have said that what Stein does is impossible, but how can it be impossible when there it is on the page? It is not what she wrote as much as the critical discourse we have available to talk about her that is problematic. Stein “simply” did what she did—she simply used her language paying attention to all of its complexities and possibilities.

We were right. We meant pale. We were wonderfully shattered. Why are we shattered. Only by an arrest of thought. I don’t make it out. Hope there. Hope not. I didn’t mean it. Please do be silly. I have forgotten the height of the table.

That was a good answer.

-----Gertrude Stein, “Pink Mellon Joy”
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