

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946)

Gertrude Stein's radical language experiments and central involvement in the Paris arts world from the early 1900s through to her death have made her work and life notorious. Much of her writing remained unpublished in her lifetime, and she never received any awards, but writers, musicians, painters, filmmakers, and dancers have all found her work inspiring. After the 1950s, when the range of her work became better known, poets like John Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian quickly recognized Stein's importance. As for Stein's own influences, she read Shakespeare, and novelists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne, George Eliot and Henry James. The contemporaries who helped shape her writing were theorists in psychology and science—like William James and Alfred North Whitehead—and painters, especially Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso.

Shortly after her birth in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on 3 February 1874, Stein moved to Vienna and then Paris; her family returned to America in 1880. English was her third language (after German and French), and she grew into adulthood on both American coasts, in Oakland and Baltimore. In 1893 Stein began study for a degree in psychology and philosophy at Radcliffe; subsequently she studied medicine at Johns Hopkins (leaving in 1901, without finishing the degree). From 1903 until her death Stein was a foreigner, an American in France. When she settled in Paris with her brother Leo, Stein's identity was firmly marked as a woman, a Jew, and a lesbian. These attributes no doubt contributed to some of the negative response her publications have received, though they rarely determined the content of her work in an overt way. There are the long poems "Lifting Belly" (1915-17), an ode to a lesbian relationship, and "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927), though neither appeared in her lifetime. Stein's only "profession" was writing, but she made no money from it until the 1930s. She lived off family investments, and when necessary she sold some of the many famous paintings that she had collected. In 1910 Alice Toklas moved in with Gertrude and Leo, and in 1913 tensions between brother and sister resulted in Leo's move to Italy. Alice had by 1913 already become Gertrude's muse, typist, and essential partner in life. Stein died on 27 July 1946 of stomach cancer.

Stein's writing can be divided into early (1903-1911), middle (1910-1931) and late (1932-1946) periods. The early consists of the novels *Q.E.D.* (1950), *Three Lives* (1909), and *The Making of Americans* (1925). In her middle period Stein wrote poems, portraits and plays, some of which were collected in *Geography and Plays* (1922). The late period included autobiography and lectures. Stein's

favorite subject was the human experience of thinking, feeling and doing, and how they happen simultaneously; her favorite object was America and family or power structures. She dispensed with the intention to represent reality in language; instead her writing embodied the reality of lived experience, something that both varies and repeats itself. Like the Cubist painters, Stein experimented with perspective, the use of domestic materials, and writing without a “model.” In *Tender Buttons* (1914), a book which declared the beginning of non-linear writing, Stein announced: “Act so that there is no use in a centre” (344). “Why is there a difference,” asks Stein, “between one window and another, why is there a difference, because the curtain is shorter” (350). The meaning of these windows is thus determined by their context (the curtains and their different lengths); rather than being inherent to the object, meaning is established relationally. [475]

In the 20s and 30s Stein became an oracle. She had a reputation as an extraordinary conversationalist and as a “Cubist” writer; visiting her and Toklas at 27, rue de Fleurus became a rite of passage for writers, painters and American tourists. Stein was thus already infamous when *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), a fanciful memoir of the Paris arts world, made her a popular writer. In 1934 Stein returned to the U.S. for the first time in thirty years to lecture and tour. In 1929 Alice and Gertrude had begun self-publishing under their own imprint, Plain Edition. Four titles appeared, including *How to Write* (1931). The success of the *Autobiography*, however, finally brought a long-term contract from Random House and interest from other American publishers, so that work began to appear regularly. In this late period some of the books are *Lectures in America* (1935), *The Geographical History of America* (1936), *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937), and *Ida* (1941).

As Stein predicted in her lecture “Composition as Explanation” (1926), her work became “classic” only after she was dead (496). “Classic” means that everyone accepts the writing even if it is not understood, and that it has been classified. During her lifetime her work was “outlaw,” or “irritating annoying stimulating,” as she characterized it (496). It has indeed since been classified, despite the number of forms she practiced: poems, portraits, plays, novels, opera, autobiography, lectures, even a children’s book. Stein’s work has thus been classified as largely unclassifiable; even though her work is unmistakable, it is always unpredictable.

Stanzas in Meditation (written in 1932, unpublished until 1956) is Stein’s longest poem, which she wrote at her summer home in the French countryside; much of it seems to refer to the landscape around her and the people who visit. Stein loved to discriminate between similar words—in this case, between “seeing” and “describing.” She claims that she writes what she sees without describing it. To “see” was to write about something that could not be described but only enacted: the tension

between words, as objects, in relation to other words/objects. The referents for words only play a part in meaning; language *means* according to how it is used. As she writes the words split: “Because I know by **weight** how **eight** are eight” (145, emphasis added). To know how many there are, she assesses how much they weigh; knowledge is thus achieved indirectly. Consider these lines: “A plain is a mountain not made round,” and “They say August is not April / But how say so if in the middle they can not know” (205, 156). When you are in the middle of something, like August or a plain, you cannot know what it is, only what it is not (April or a mountain). “I have lost the thread of my discourse,” she admits at one point; however, “it makes no difference if we find it / If we found it” since it finds her, as long as she keeps writing (155).

T. S. Eliot’s review of Stein in 1927 characterized her reception: “it is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one’s mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is the future, then the future is [something] in which we ought not to be interested” (595). Mina Loy compared Stein in 1924 to the late nineteenth-century scientist Madame Curie: Stein puts consciousness under a microscope “to extract / a radium of the word” (94). And in 1937, Samuel Beckett said that Stein was “a mathematician [who] is in love with his figures; a mathematician for whom the solution of the problem is of entirely secondary interest” (172-173). Treating words as a chemist or as a mathematician might, as if words were elements or numbers, strips them of reference—to other books and to history. History does not disappear; instead, the past becomes something that happens in the present, like a memory happens in the present. In this way, time present is continuous, Stein insisted; even if we never forget the past, we live in the present, whether we know it or not. Marianne Moore favorably reviewed *The Making of the Americans* in 1926; in her review, she quotes a passage from the novel: “it is very difficult in quarreling to be certain in either one what the other one is remembering” (129). Stein wondered also what her readers would be remembering as they read. She wanted them not to remember but rather to concentrate on the present moment of reading.

Bibliography

- Beckett, Samuel. *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
- Bridgman, Richard. *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*. New York: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Curnutt, Kirk, ed. *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. [476]
- Eliot, T. S. "Charleston, Hey! Hey!" *The Nation & Athenaeum* 40.17 (29 January 1927): 595.
- Hoffman, Michael, ed. *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986.
- Loy, Mina. "Gertrude Stein." *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. Ed. Roger L. Conover. New York: Noonday Press, 1996. 94.
- Moore, Marianne. "The Spare American Emotion." *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Patricia C. Willis. New York: Penguin, 1987. 128-131.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Composition as Explanation." *A Stein Reader*. Ed. Ulla E. Dydo. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993. 495-503.
- . *Tender Buttons. Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: Library of America, 1998. 313-355.
- . *Stanzas in Meditation*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.
- Esdale, Logan. "Gertrude Stein." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Ed. Burt Kimmelman. New York: Facts on File, 2005. 474-476.