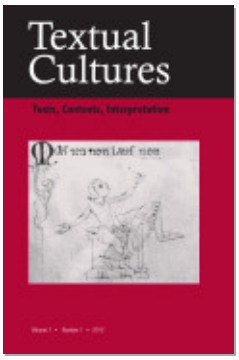
Stanzas In Meditation: The Corrected Edition (review)

Logan Esdale



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Stanzas In Meditation is a long commonplace poem, filled with descriptions of the writer's literal experience. "In looking up I have managed to see four things" she says (Part I, Stanza X). Stein wrote this, her longest poem (164 stanzas in five parts), in 1932 just before *The Autobiography Of Alice B. Toklas*, the memoir that made her famous. She and Toklas were at their country home in Bilignin, in southeastern France. For almost a decade they had spent the summer and fall seasons in that area, out of Paris, and this was their fourth year in a leased home that gave them a sense of belonging. By 1932 they knew the people and the landscape well. When war came seven years later this emplacement helped protect them from Nazi removal. Writing *Stanzas* reinforced her claim to place there.

The poem's motto may be "Seen is often very well said" (IV.III): that is, the poem was not just an occasion for Stein to write what she was seeing, it fulfilled her idea that seeing was made possible through writing. She did not write what she had seen; instead, she wrote in order to see. Donald Sutherland said in his introduction to the first publication of *Stanzas* in 1956 (and usefully reprinted in the edition under review) that it "expresses the action of the mind willing and realizing its own presence, in the present, to its own thought" (43), and there is throughout "a recognition that what the mind is present to in its act of presence is simply the *thisness* of any object" (43). Foremost in the poet's mind is the *thisness* of the words themselves, and it may be that Stein was never more attuned to the sound and look of words than she was in this (as John Ashbery has called it in an essay also reprinted in this edition) "hymn to possibility" (52). Sutherland's simple description more than suffices: "there is a balancing or drawing taut of the line by repetition with differing emphases" (45).

> I like a moth in love and months
> But they will always say the same thing when
> They sing singing
> I wish I could repeat as new just what they do
> (III.XXII)

The first line is made taut through the words "like" and "love", "moth" and "months", and their syntax, while verse two stresses sound: "they", "always", "say", "same", as well as "they" and "thing". The words transform (sing) along the line. Stein's interest in transformation was so powerful that her work can be unsettling or unacceptable to some readers. She looked for the difference that repetition makes, not similarity; how to "repeat as new" was her self-directive. Late in the poem we find this one-line stanza: "I feel that this stanza has been well-known" (V.XI). Did she start a stanza and then decide it was, in a sense, too well known? Another writer would use an often-heard thought or start stanza XI over again, but Stein offers what amounts to a gravestone inscription and goes on to stanza XII for a fresh start.

While many of the meditations have an abstract quality and read best when read aloud, there are clearly referential moments. Here are two passages that center on things literally seen and heard around their pastoral home. They deal with themes of proximity, intimacy and growth. Ulla Dydo has glossed the second passage: "In the Rhône Valley, dried marsh grass, *blache*, is used for strawberry beds as well as litter for animals and bedding" (2003, 518).

> Hours of a tree growing. He said it injured walls.
> We said the owner and the one then here preferred it.
> Imagine what to say he changed his mind.
> He said it would not matter until ten years or five.
>
> (I.VIII)

> It will be often fortunately that strawberries need straw
> Or may they yes indeed have marsh grass ready
> It will support all who will have support
> And she will kindly share hers with them
> His with them
>
> (II.IV)

Both passages exist in more than one version. For *Stanzas In Meditation* there are three potential copy-texts: Stein's summer 1932 manuscript (six notebooks, two for Part I and one each for the other four parts: Stein let the notebook determine the length of the parts) and two typescripts (abbreviated below as "ts") made by Alice Toklas, the first in October 1932 and the second late that year or early in 1933. When Toklas made the first one she typed "injured walls," with a comma. Toklas was not a perfect secretary. In the second typescript we read "When I look down a vista I see not

roses but a faun" and the last word should be "farm" (V.VII). This new edition by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina finally corrects that error. Another correction they made is in "Or may they yes indeed have marsh grass ready." In both the manuscript and typescript 2 the word "may" was struck out by Stein and replaced with "can", a change accepted by Donald Gallup in 1956 when he edited the poem. Gallup used "can" even though he undoubtedly noticed that Stein had changed almost every instance of "may" to "can". Something was odd but he followed the logic of using the author's last version (ts 2).

> I said the difference is complicated
> And she said yes is it it is
> Or she said it is is it.
> (III.III)

The story of why changing "can" back to "may" stands as a correction, and not an editorial choice, has fascinated Stein readers since the textual problems of *Stanzas* were first described by Ulla Dydo in 1981, in *Text 1*. (Her article has three subsequent iterations: a follow-up article in 1985; an introduction to sixteen stanzas she selected and edited for her *Stein Reader* in 1993; and a chapter in her 2003 book *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934*.) Stein removed the presence of "may" from the text at Toklas's behest. When Toklas moved in with Stein in 1910 they exchanged relationship histories as part of a quasi-marriage ritual; they told each other everything—except, it turned out, the story of Stein's love for a certain Mary "May" Bookstaver. After Toklas learned about May, every instance of "may" was for her a reminder of Stein's lack of troth.

Stein was a medical student at Johns Hopkins University when she met May Bookstaver, and in 1903, shortly after moving to 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris, she wrote a novella, *Q. E. D.*, directly based on their affair, which by that point was over. Although Stein claimed to have forgotten about the novella when it was rediscovered in April 1932, she had stayed in touch with May over the years. (May, who became Mrs. Charles Knoblauch, supported Stein's publishing efforts.) Immediately after finding the manuscript of *Q. E. D.* Stein gave it to Louis Bromfield, hoping he might secure a publisher for it; unsuccessful, he returned the manuscript in December. It was then that Toklas read *Q. E. D.* and learned about Stein's first love. Apparently Toklas then started typescript 2 of *Stanzas*, noticed "may", and forced Stein to expunge it from both the manuscript and typescript 2. I can imagine Toklas's frustrated reaction: the word is prevalent and often begins

a line and so looks like a name. This line seems innocuous, "They may be they may be there may be hours of light" (V.XIV), but these two could be referential: "Without in pleasure may they like may now" (I.XI) and "May I may I not even marry" (V.LI), which puns "May I" and "marry". Was Stein's attraction to the word also an attraction to the person it named?

Let's remember that Toklas had been typing Stein's manuscripts for many years and that Stein regularly left personal notes for her in the margins. Toklas was Stein's first and most important audience, and she also knew that Stein's technique gave value to even the taken-for-granted words such as "may" or "a". Stein makes us read every word; we know and never know what is coming next. So when Toklas reread *Stanzas* for typescript 2 and *may* leapt out—Stein's style and personal history were conspiring against her—she put Stein to work. Toklas could have made the substitutions herself as she typed, but emotions were high and she made Stein do them.

Dydo has said that the connection between May Bookstaver, *Q. E. D.*, and the effacement of "may" came to her in a dream, but the dream pulled from her knowledge of Stein's archive at Yale. Dydo knew that the manuscripts were, contrary to the popular understanding of Stein, an often essential contextual resource. There are two reasons why the Stein manuscripts had and have been neglected and that it has taken so long for a corrected edition of *Stanzas* to appear. First is that people have believed Stein's claim that she did not revise, and second, that Stein's style was so random it did not truly matter whether the printed text was "correct" or not. As Dydo pointed out in 1981, however:

> Stein claimed that she did not revise her work. She said that she did not believe in revision, for if writing involved the perception of the here and now, revisions were bound to force a text into a different here and now, which required different verbal forms. Therefore revisions would falsify the original text. Given this view, it is not surprising to find very few revisions in many of Stein's works. Her practice varied, however. Some pieces show little or no revision while others show considerable revision. Her claim that she did not revise is not entirely true. It contributed to the myth that hers was "automatic" writing. The Stein Archive offers evidence that throughout her life she took notes, jotting down long and short passages which she later used in compositions, that she planned, drafted, and revised certain pieces extensively, and that writing was not, as the *Autobiography* suggests, the creation of genius which required little effort and no revision. Even pieces that show no evidence of revision

> were not tossed off without the hard work and concentrated effort that Stein called *meditation*. (1981, 286–87)

Above I suggested that "I feel that this stanza has been well-known" is evidence that Stein's mode was to start anew rather than revise. Yet her mode of revision was a kind of transformation, a display of change: as Setina and Hollister have noted, the "rhythms of Stein's repetitions [. . .] make revision an element of poetic style" (xiii). Stein was at least as committed to revision as the writer driven to improve or correct his work. She revised as she wrote, not so much after. Other writers use revision to close down possibility in the name of coherence.

Perhaps the paramount value of this edition of *Stanzas* is that it stands for careful attention to avant-garde texts. Stein, in fact, needs editors who figure out the history of composition and compare versions even more than the typical writer does because catching errors cannot be accomplished through close listening alone. Stein's sentences are, as Dydo has said, "so different in construction and idiom from standard English sentences" (1985, 11) that what might be an error for another writer is not for Stein. Both of these passages are correct, for example:

> Very nearly as much a there
> That is one thing not to be made anything
> (III.IV)

> It can for which they could with and a
> Many can not come in this for nor without them
> (III.V)

Informed by Dydo's argument that Stein's late 1932, early 1933 revisions to *Stanzas* "are personal and not literary" (13–14), the editors have restored the poem to its manuscript version, prior to Toklas's anger over "may". They offer us a clean reading text of the poem, using endnotes to describe the differences among versions. They also correct the numbering of the stanzas. In the 1956 edition there are stanzas with the same number. Hollister and Setina acknowledge that Stein often "played with numbering" (262) but they see evidence that she and Toklas tried in this case to fix a sequencing upset. Finally each stanza has its own number.

So the editors did not use typescript 2 as a copy-text because Stein changed "may" to "can" more than 400 times to satisfy Toklas, and typescript 1 — although free of the "may" debacle, and Catharine Stimpson and

Harriet Chessman used it in 1998 for their Library of America edition of Stein's writings—contains numerous Toklas errors: for instance, "attach" in manuscript becomes "attack", "oh yes" becomes "always", and "unusual" becomes "universal". Typescript 2 also has typos, some of which Gallup corrected by proofing against the manuscript ("endanger" had become "end anger", and "frogs" had become "prays") and some he did not ("present" became "prevent", and "curtain" became "certain"). Again, Stein's unidiomatic style makes catching errors a challenge. Setina and Hollister have therefore done heroic work not only in peeling *Stanzas* back to the summer 1932 manuscript, but also in laying out (in the notes) the various changes made afterwards.

As far as I can tell the editors strictly follow the restored manuscript. This may have been a mistake. As Dydo argues in *The Language That Rises*, forced by Toklas to go carefully through the manuscript and typescript 2 for instances of "may", Stein also "made other, literary revisions in certain stanzas that are distinct improvements [and] true revisions" (498). With that in mind I give two examples, line 41 in I.VIII and line 15 in I.XII. The first I choose in part because Joan Retallack, who supplies an introduction to this edition, miswrites and tells us that Stein began the line with "world" and then changed it to "word"; the sequence goes the other way (the manuscript has "word"). The editors strike through canceled words and put in bold the changes apparently made after Toklas read *Q. E. D.* The acronym Y refers to the 1956 edition, and LLT refers to five stanzas that were published in a 1936 issue of *Life and Letters To-day*. The first line is what appears in the reading text:

41 Out from the whole wide word I chose thee
Out from the whole wide world I chose thee [ts 1]
Out from the whole wide word world I chose thee [ts 2]
Out from the whole wide world I chose thee [Y]

15 Just why they may count how may one mistaken.
Just why they may can count how may many one mistaken. [ms]
Just why they may can count how may one many are mistaken. [ts 2]
Just why they can count how many are mistaken. (LLT)

The editors use "word" even though Toklas typed "world" in ts 1 and Stein (apparently) wrote in "world" on ts 2. (While it is clear enough in the notes which are Stein's changes and which are Toklas's changes or typos, I wish the editors had further sharpened the distinction.) This happens again in

II.VII with the line "Remember this once they knew that they way to give". Dydo's *Stein Reader* and ts 1 both have it as "Remember this once they knew that the way to give". Changing "they" to "the" was Toklas's unauthorized decision? The second passage I choose because Dydo offered the revised line in a footnote to her "distinct improvements" argument. As I understand her perspective, the line should read: "Just why they may count how many are mistaken." Although "many are" seems a determined Stein revision, "may one" is used.

In a preface the editors separate their method from Gallup's in the 1950s: "Beginning in the 1970s, alternate approaches have paid greater attention to processes of composition and conditions of production. Editions prepared according to these principles reflect greater interest in the interpersonal and, after Jerome McGann, cultural and institutional factors that shape texts" (x). The decision not to include Stein's literary changes as she reread the poem late in 1932, however, does not square with a stated affiliation with the interpersonal. The editors are not absolutely beholden to the restored manuscript — they "silently correct obvious typographical errors" and renumber the stanzas — yet the interpersonal text appears only in the notes. (The notes are cued to line numbers in each stanza, and I wish the reading text included line numbers in the margin — a number of stanzas have over 50 lines and some have over 100.) In the end, I can see typescript 2 as irredeemable, but distinguishing the personal from the literary changes, and using the latter, would bring still more light to the topic of Stein and revision.

Providing critical context here are the excellent Sutherland introduction to the 1956 edition, a review of that edition by John Ashbery in *Poetry* (July 1957), and the Retallack introduction. Retallack suggests that the rediscovery of *Q. E. D.* affected Stein's composition of *Stanzas*, not just the revisions. In short, Toklas was right: instances of "may" were, Retallack says, "sites of confession" that involved "considerable intrusion from things past"; embedded in *Stanzas* are allusions to *Q. E. D.* and Bookstaver. Dydo too suspected this in the 1980s, but by 2003 she concluded that Stein wrote *Stanzas* free of Toklas's jealousy and that Toklas did not confront her about Bookstaver until after the poem was done. It seems more likely that instances of "may" were not there to antagonize the amanuensis. We might see (I am making these up) "align lisp to clasp" or "a listen token lash" and think "Alice Toklas". Stein certainly played such games, as Toklas well knew, but it is probably the case here that similar to Toklas seeing "unusual" as "universal", she saw "may" as May Bookstaver — the latter was

her translation. Stein's writing, its chirography and its intentions, is not always perfectly legible.[1]

Whether the rediscovery of *Q. E. D.* created a referential, Bookstaver axis in *Stanzas* or not, it did lead to serious problems for editors of the *Stanzas*. Hollister and Setina have elegantly sorted them out. Their extensive notes detailing the history of revision, together with the Sutherland, Ashbery, and Retallack essays, make clear that Stein's play with repetition and the poetic line was never more considered or assured. The reading text feels positively buoyant. Stein held back the affair with May Bookstaver in her personal life, but as a writer, "Although although allowed out loud" (IV. XXI). While *Stanzas In Meditation* has had its Toklas-enforced revisions clipped away, nothing has been lost.

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Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. 2011. *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN 978-0-8122-4280-5. Pp. xiii + 368, illustr. $45.

In *Divine Art, Infernal Machine*, Elizabeth Eisenstein's goals are admittedly ambitious: to examine contrasting viewpoints on western print culture from its emergence in the fifteenth century to the present. While she acknowledges that "the field is much too large to be covered in a single book" (ix), the author justifies her approach by underscoring the striking recurrence across the centuries among attitudes toward printed books in spite of the numerous shifts in the history of print (the appearance of the first printed Bibles, the spread of anti-government pamphlets in Britain and France in the seventeenth-century, the decisive impact of journals on the successive French revolutions, the emergence of industrial printing and massive newspapers in the nineteenth century and, eventually, the advent of the digital age). Eisenstein traces the anxiety about the overload of information that characterizes our time back at least to the seventeenth century, when Leib-

1. Another noteworthy moment in the rediscovery of *Q. E. D.* is Stein's effort to get it published. Had she succeeded, Toklas's annoyance would pale by comparison with the reaction of intolerant American readers. Imagine the *Autobiography* and *Q. E. D.* coming out together: the latter might have squelched the popularity of the former, or lesbian literature might have gone mainstream.