On Not Not Reading *Stanzas in Meditation:* Pressures and Pleasures of the Text

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I.

By now—on the eve of the second decade of the twenty-first century—it's not that Stein scholars disagree about the importance of *Stanzas in Meditation*; it's widely considered one of that energetically idiosyncratic poet's masterpieces. "Masterpiece" is, of course, a word Gertrude Stein liked very much. But she, who truly wanted to give pleasure to her readers—pleasure at least equal to what she experienced in the writing—could not be other than mightily disturbed by the frequent fate accompanying that honorific, particularly among modernist classics: the fate of being first among the great unread, or very little read, except by the minority of ardent devotees and, of course, earnest graduate students toiling on particularly courageous dissertations. It's an exhilarating rite of passage to wrestle with the literary monster (flip side of

masterpiece?) in pursuit of something more than career-making CVs. There is the tonic challenge of confronting—embracing!—an ultimate impenetrability of overweening scale and intractable mystery. (The allure of sacred texts is similar.) Think of Pound's *Cantos,* Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* Zukofsky's *A,* and Stein's *The Making of Americans* and *Patriarchal Poetry* as well as the text we have here, beautifully presented with corrections, unobtrusive textual notes, and variants. All these works, however revered by the valiant few, reliably bring on the furtive question, Have you actually read it, I mean, every word, all the way through? Within more or less self-confidently literate circles, in private conversation among trusted friends, the verdict on the modernist masterpiece bookshelf tends to be "more or less unreadable."

If, as Gertrude Stein claimed, America invented the twentieth century, that development was the logical consequence of its eighteenth-century invention of happiness as inalienable right. An extraordinary concept, transmuted into the pursuit of pleasure with limitless paraphernalia that has become the most abundant and problematic of U.S. exports. Stein herself was a notable export among countless artists and writers seeking the American ideal of the freer, happier life by moving to Paris, with its promise of convivial experimentation in all things cultural and erotic. It's a lovely irony that the life-long expatriate Stein (from 1903 to her death in France in 1946) became the iconic American most identified with the invention of a truly twentieth-century literature. She has been less reliably associated with the pleasure of the text. Which brings us to *Stanzas,* the most obdurately closed—so it has seemed—to even the best intentioned, most diligent readers of Stein. Since its composition in 1932—alongside the enormously popular *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—*Stanzas in Meditation* has conspicuously

failed to satisfactorily consummate the readerly act. Or is it the hapless reader who has failed? Either way, the obvious if uneasy question is this: Just what is one to do with yet another "unreadable" modernist "masterpiece"?

The constructive response to this entirely reasonable question is not to malign Stein's purpose or, worse yet, to renounce the pleasure principle. Rather, let's do some rethinking of approaches to this curiously imbricated text. Imbricated with, among other things, crowds of uninhabited pronouns—most notably, the omnipresent "they"s, but also unidentified "she"s, "he"s and "it"s. Only the first-person pronoun is a constant—an "I" that voices the many forms of meditation propelling the stanzas, despite endemic complexity, with an against-the-odds coherence. One way to describe this work (one among myriad possibilities) is as an enigmatically choreographed interaction of pronouns performing to a music of meditation so polyvalent it throws that very word/act into exploratory relief. Hence, to reformulate the question, What does one do with a 192-page wordscape of constantly shifting textual weather (whether), when its tones and moods can appear elusive at the very moment of discernment? Without a spirit of adventure, this could congeal into a rhetorical question, so let's not linger.

II.

> . . . it is extremely difficult not to make sense extremely difficult not to make sense extremely difficult not to make sense and excuse.[1]

It is also extremely difficult, absent a random word generator, not to make meaning, and not to make meaning extremely difficult if you are Gertrude Stein; that is, to have nothing in or on your

mind as you write. Writing is a form of thinking unless clever artifice is systematically employed to sabotage personal associative processes. As far as we know, Stein—who did like to perform methodical experiments as compositional discipline—was the opposite of a randomizer. She did not use any sort of chance operation to locate or compose the vocabularies of her texts. Needless to say, she didn't appropriate language. To the extent that Wordsworthian or Shakespearian echoes emerge in a work like *Stanzas* it is because they came to mind as she composed. The source was her astutely considered, deeply felt experience of the aesthetics and psychological nuances of daily life laced with permutative playfulness. As she might have put it, she was living the writing she was doing, and vice versa.

Among critics who have attempted to render the reader's interaction with *Stanzas in Meditation* less formidable there have been two leading approaches—biographical puzzle solving, and formalist puzzle solving—most often deployed as if they were mutually exclusive. One is dedicated to the discovery of hidden meanings locked beneath the surface of strategic vocabulary clues, and tends to overlook the play of surface word patterns as an integral part of the sense of the piece. With that kind of search warrant in hand, *Stanzas* is no doubt an intriguing puzzle of subtexts and other sorts of oblique, intentionally obfuscated, or hidden and coded material embedding a both conscious and unconscious autobiographical substrate. The danger in this kind of reading—if narrowly executed—is that an equally present surface-poetics of indeterminacy and word-play can be almost entirely overlooked in favor of "underlying" subject matter. What is lost is the significance of language constructs themselves—patterns of pronouns, for instance. The second approach has attempted to make sense of the poem by

means of formalist analyses that assume a field of fluidly indeterminate meaning signifying very little in particular, while identifying the material elements of word patterns as the major source of energy and import. Critics espousing this approach have suggested that the search for determinate meaning not only will add to the reader's frustration but is fundamentally inappropriate to the nature of the "abstract" work that *Stanzas* happens to be.[2]

Here are particularly interesting examples of the two approaches. As I think you'll notice, neither one explicitly or in principle rules out attention of other sorts. Elizabeth Fifer in *Rescued Readings: A Reconstruction of Gertrude Stein's Difficult Texts* says this about *Stanzas*:

> While apparently presenting an entirely "proper" and entirely banal series of subjects and events, much of the energy of the text lies beneath the surface of its difficult style in its parodic play with allusions, ambiguity, partial statements, evasions, coding, and other techniques of erotic display. For readers who insist on the meaninglessness of this text, "Stanzas" must become rough going indeed. (109)

Ulla Dydo, in *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934*, suggests that "the disembodied abstract language [of *Stanzas*] rose from internal energy with no external stimulus" (488). "By 1932, contexts almost vanish from Stein's work," Dydo writes, "her language virtually empties out of references" (489). And later,

> Each time I try to grasp a passage, phrase, or stanza, it changes shape, dissolving its boundaries and loosening the bounds of commentary. In this instability of shape, voice, and meaning lies the maddening magnificence of the stanzas. I want to read, not

> read into or pin down, the poems. I read aloud, listen to the changing permutations. The more the language empties out of references and antecedents, nouns to pronouns, the more new readings open. (503)

I want to say at this point that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive in the reading strategies they imply. On a formal level there is a lot going on. There is every indication that the same is true on a referential level, and Ulla Dydo's important archival work (discussed below) affirms Stein's multiple compositional intentions and designs. Meanwhile, I doubt that Elizabeth Fifer would deny that "erotic display" in a poem begins with the display of the language itself. What seems perfectly clear to me, even among pervasive impediments to a sense of what and who is being addressed by the author, is that Stein has set a full complement of "language games" in motion.[3] It makes sense to assume that those language games include all the things both Fifer and Dydo mention—"allusions, ambiguity, partial statements, evasions, coding, and other techniques of erotic display" (Fifer) *and* the "evolving verbal landscape" that Dydo is attentive to; one, as she notes, that is given a good deal of its strangely evocative presence as literally "a voice composing words," and song, and parody, that is, "patterns we can hear and see."

The "erotic display" must be evident in the surface pleasures of the language. Meditations, reflections, ruminations on instances of eros and its discontents—couched by means of coded or oblique allusions—are part of what creates the potent atmosphere of this poetic project as well as the intercourse of text and intertext, intratext and subtexts, beginning with the very first line of Part I, Stanza I, "I caught a bird which made a ball." Metrical properties of this

line are part of what makes it beguiling even as its charm turns into the jarring image of a (child's?) hand grasping, caressing, squeezing a little bird into a ball. All this and more is only enhanced by knowing that among Stein's pet names for Alice were "birdie," "love bird," "little ball," "lovely ball," "lively ball"—found in Stein's personal love notes to Toklas.[4] None of this exhausts either the gestural qualities of the line or a precise proliferation of meanings that accumulate with additional thought, knowledge, perspectives. (I'll suggest a Wordsworthian aspect below.) Lesbian coding, modernist play, references to everyday life create a poetic puzzle that is also an expressive agon of overdetermination, ironically, paradoxically, leading not only to autobiographical hints and revelations but to a high degree of indeterminacy. Which the formalist in me is happy to say is in no danger of reduction to a bio note. Similarly, all the bio notes in the world will not pave over the potentially generative (with an actively resourceful reading poesis) indeterminacy of *Stanzas in Meditation.* All of which is to say that composed indeterminacy doesn't erase the personal but accommodates it in its complexities and inherent ambiguities (sometimes manifestations of very personal authorial ambivalences).

III.

The impossibility of charting more than a few particulars Stein might have had in mind, or that might have come to mind in the simultaneous eye-brain-hand act of writing as a form of thinking she herself identifies as "meditation," signals the necessity of turning one's readerly mind toward a model of construal more useful than the eternal return of New Critical analysis. I'd like to suggest a dynamic of something like "particulate/wave" complementarity that, when registered in the reader's mind, leads to sense and

meaning in the midst of pervasive textual indeterminacy.[5] One of course must ask if there are any discernible patterns of particulars among the liminally associative waves of language Stein composed into stanzas. My assumption is that stanzaic momentum is of course driven by significant particulars that are only intermittently coterminous with specific vocabulary, that is, direct autobiographical references or coding. The enormous quantity of indeterminate pronouns alone suggests that any discursive subtext here is in the form of an intentionally vague *roman sans clef.* And yet, Dydo, by critical temperament a formalist who embraces the indeterminacy of the piece, and who prefers the term "context" to "biography,"[6] has accomplished a major breakthrough in revealing a rare denotative pattern. It's worth noting that Dydo could only have done this through her precise formalist focus on surface structures of the language, in this case astute textual sleuthing among manuscripts and successive typescripts. Had she not been so dedicated to examining specific word constructions by looking closely at revisions from one typescript to another, Dydo would not have noticed a biographical drama lurking in certain vocabulary choices.

The background to that drama begins with the fact that in 1932 Stein, for no doubt overdetermined reasons, decided to once again explore the possibilities of autobiographical writing. I say "once again" because of the sudden reappearance that year (apparently just prior to her beginning work on *Stanzas*) of an unpublished autobiographical manuscript (written in 1903)—a novella she had titled "Quod Erat Demonstrandum," posthumously published as *Q.E.D.* It is a ruminative roman à clef concerning a lesbian love triangle in which Stein had been deeply involved and deeply hurt. The whole thing had not only ended painfully at the time but was

to stir upheaval three decades later when the recovered manuscript reentered Stein's life and consciousness and, eventually, Toklas's. Stein admitted to Toklas that the lovers depicted in the novella were directly based on an affair she had with a young woman named May Bookstaver, the sole early love interest she had not disclosed in a reciprocal "confession" she and Toklas undertook at the start of their commitment to one another. Apart from feeling wounded by Stein's secrecy, Toklas had good reason to suspect that thoughts of May may have entered the writing of *Stanzas.* May Bookstaver was indeed linguistically embedded in the text in hundreds of instances of the modal verb "may." When Toklas—who had just recently typed all those "may"s from Stein's handwritten version—realized in hindsight what was going on, her fury led to a spate of substitutions of "can" for "may." The ensuing turmoil caused not only a systematic expulsion of May/"may" from *Stanzas,* it is largely responsible for this new edition.

Dydo's attention to the scores of "may"s inexplicably changed to "can"s revealed the biographical cleansing that Toklas had demanded. Thanks to Dydo's work—pace Toklas—the current edition is full of the original evocations of May.[7] A significant issue of textual integrity was therefore put right, but many more questions arise from knowledge of these fascinating and fraught circumstances. Chief among them: To what extent was the writing of *Stanzas* more generally given to retrospective thoughts and emotions activated by Stein's reacquaintance with her youthful introspections and longings? May Bookstaver in the guise of the novella's character Helen reappeared in Stein's emotional life and thought at a time that was significantly complicated by a subsequent personal history charged with cumulative difficulties.[8] Might "retrospection"

(another form of meditation) triggered by the *Q.E.D.* time capsule have affected the project of *Stanzas* more profoundly?

Some intertextual reading is called for here. *Q.E.D.,* written in the year following the 1902 affair with May, was an attempt to understand not only the excitement, angst, guilt, and confusion brought on by her romantic and sexual feelings for May but, more generally, her fear of passion. She wondered whether it was truly love she had experienced toward May while needing to puzzle through more philosophical questions about the nature of love and moral responsibility. *Q.E.D.* is the textual scene of Stein "figuring out" these things, beginning with its long epigraph from *As You Like It* on "what 'tis to love." Adele, Stein's stand-in character, is trying to apply conscientious rational thought to a situation that the beat-by-beat narration makes evident has turned into something of a mess and a torment. Adele, "with a mind attuned to experiment" (62), is challenged by May cum Helen: "Haven't you ever stopped thinking long enough to feel?" Adele replies that she is given to "thinking [as] a pretty continuous process . . . sometimes it's more active than at others but it's always pretty much there" (66). Adele explicitly identifies her thought processes as "meditation," which manifests in the novella as the voice of Adele "thinking aloud" to herself—a voice (and psychological purview) that certainly evolves over Stein's writing life but some of which is nonetheless familiar in her subsequent work, including *Stanzas in Meditation.* Rereading it alongside *Stanzas,* I looked at passages in *Q.E.D.* that are explicitly labeled acts of meditation. Here's a sample:

> Her meditations again took form. "As for me is it another little indulgence of my superficial emotions or is there any possibility of my really learning to realise stronger feelings. If it's the first I

> will call a halt promptly and at once. If it's the second I won't back out, no not for any amount of moral sense," and she smiled to herself. "Certainly it is very difficult to tell. The probabilities are that this is only another one of the many and so I suppose I had better quit and leave it. It's the last day together and so to be honorable I must quit at once." She then dismissed it all and for some time longer found it very pleasant there playing with the brightness. (64)
>
> After a long pause she began again meditatively, "I wonder if either of us has the slightest idea what is going on in the other's head." (65)

There is a climactic moment in this process giving onto a different form of meditation:

> . . . and then she [Adele] stopped thinking. She kept quiet some time longer watching the pleasant night. . . . "Why" she said in a tone of intense interest, "it's like a bit of mathematics. Suddenly it does itself and you begin to see. . . . I never even thought I saw before and I really do think I begin to see. Yes it's very strange but surely I do begin to see."
>
> All during the summer Adele did not lose the sense of having seen, but on the other hand her insight did not deepen. She meditated abundantly on this problem and it always ended with a childlike pride in the refrain "I did see a little, I certainly did catch a glimpse." (66–67)

As the novella progresses, it's clear that Adele's continuous meditation—thinking and rethinking—becomes increasingly exasperating to Helen, exhausting to both young women.

In a spirit of intertextual experimentation, let's fast forward to

1932 and see what happens if one reads passages from *Stanzas,* Part I, Stanza XV, alongside these quotations from *Q.E.D.* The bolded "may"s below are restored from the "can"s that Alice insisted upon with Gertrude's agreement. To state the obvious, because typescript 2, the one Toklas "amended," shows that not all "may"s were changed to "can"s, those that were changed are likely to be signposts for scenes of reference (surely involving surrounding text) that had to do with May. If this is the case, it's odd that Toklas didn't demand a greater purge via more thoroughgoing revisions to *Stanzas.* Might Stein have convinced her that the "may"s were simply an ornamental homage? I don't know, but finding mere ornamentation unlikely, I take the altered "may"s to be sites of confession where surrounding text must, in at least some cases, involve considerable intrusion from things past. In reading the *Stanzas* excerpts below, keep in mind that in the passages quoted from *Q.E.D.,* Adele's questions are followed by a declaration of finally "seeing."

Should they **may** be they might if they delight
In why they must see it be there not only necessarily
But which they might in which they might
For which they might delight if they look there
And they see there that they look there
To see it be there which it is if it is
Which may be where where it is
If they do not occasion it to be different
From what it is.
In one direction there is the sun and the moon
In the other direction there are cumulus clouds and the sky
In the other direction there is why
They look at what they see

They look very long while they talk along
And they **may** be said to see that at which they look
Whenever there is no chance of its not being warmer
Than if they wish which they were.
They see that they have what is there **may** there
Be there also what is to be there if they **may** care
They care for it of course they care for it. (I.XV.1–20)

Six lines down, "reflecting" is used similarly to "meditating" in *Q.E.D.* (one of several ways Stein thinks of acts of meditation throughout *Stanzas*) with the otherwise obvious difference that personae inhabiting the "they" or "they"s reflected upon are never identified.

Once again I think I am reflecting
And they **may** be patient in not why now
And more than if which they are reflecting
That if they with which they will be near now
Or not at all in the same better
Not for which they will be all called
By which they will **may** be as much as if wishing
But which each one has seen each one
Not at all now
Nor if they like as if with them well or ordinarily
Should they be more enjoined of which they like
It is very well to have seen what they have seen
But which they will not only be alike.
They are very evenly tired with more of this (I.XV.26–39)

The passage ends, or I should say pauses before the preposition "For"—call to continue—with an echoing exhaustion. And yet the

stanza goes on for another 44 lines of continuous thinking, reflecting, meditating, rumination . . .

What may come of this intertextual noticing? There is nothing really that I want to assert other than that the subject matter of *Q.E.D.* significantly appears to be one of many subtexts infusing this section of *Stanzas* with its strange constellations of psychological energies and concerns. The meditative atmosphere of *Stanzas,* where meditation is at times an intensely dedicated ratiocination edged with emotion, recalls similar "meditative" passages in *Q.E.D.* The hypothetical "may" in *Stanzas*—surrounded by the many occurrences of "if"—leads me to read this as an ongoing thought experiment analogous to those in which May (Bookstaver), the hypothetical incarnate, is urgently reconceived as Helen. So the intertextual experiment, for this reader, yields analogies of thought processes and atmosphere, that is, complex textual ecologies that seem to share some confluence of sources. This kind of reading leaves the many forms of contingency—determinate and indeterminate—intact.

With this new edition, *Stanzas* goes on undeterred by Toklas's ire much as Stein did in 1932 notwithstanding the reconstructive sprinkling of "can"s. She had, in the writing of *Stanzas,* meditated through things troubling her, reflected on glimpses of beauty, delighted in her wisdom and humor; and even, perhaps, cherished glimpses of glimpses past. At the end of this poetic project—with book contract in hand—Stein was sufficiently flushed of confusions and doubts to recover her humorous zest and ventriloquize Alice B. Toklas into "her own" autobiography as the beloved and sagacious chronicler of Gertrude's genius. The pronouns remain notably unreliable.

IV.

Meanwhile, autobiographical writing *and* subtle coding weren't the only things on Stein's mind as she embarked on *Stanzas.* In a letter the year before, she had written of her "passion" in her youth "for the long dull poems of Wordsworth and Crabbe"—"I want to do a long dull poem too and *a bare one* . . ."[9] After beginning *Stanzas,* she wrote the following to a friend:

> I am working a lot I am trying to write a long dull poem like the long ones of Wordsworth and it is very interesting to do I was always fond of these long dull poems[10]

The first reference to her interest in Wordsworth's "long dull" poems as models for a project of her own seems to have come before the reappearance of *Q.E.D.* If we put Stein's reconsideration of Wordsworth together with her renewed interest in autobiography, the work that comes to mind is Wordsworth's long (not necessarily so dull) poem *The Prelude,* though she might have been thinking of any of his semi-autobiographical poems.[11] There are a number of outright Wordsworthian lines in *Stanzas*—all the more remarkable for their sparsely scattered presence: "All out of cloud. Come hither. Neither / Aimless and with a pointedly rested displeasure" (I.VI.53–54); "Out from the whole wide wor/l/d I chose thee" (I.VIII.41).[12] While *The Prelude* or other "long dull poems" may have been one initiating inspiration, there is, more significantly, an obvious enterprise in *Stanzas* that is about *not* being Wordsworthian. According to the editors of this volume, "word" in that last quote began as "world"; the change—with stroke of pen—accomplishes an anti-romantic lettristic coup without erasing the lyrical mode/mood of the line. (Since the line in its first

iteration, or either for that matter, may well refer to her choosing Toklas as her wife, this is another probable specimen of delightfully overdetermined text.) Ambiguity of intention and tone can be glimpsed in many places throughout *Stanzas,* including the line "I have thought that the bird makes the same noise differently" (I.X.22) where "differently"—no doubt, among other things—crafts the crucial tonal difference of humor.

The opening lines of the first poem in *Stanzas* can be reread (sliding new senses palimpsestically over others) as evocative of the opening section of *The Prelude* with its early childhood scenes and, at greater length, in "Book First, Introduction—Childhood and School-time," where one finds this:

> Free as a bird to settle where I will.
> What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale
> Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove
> Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream
> Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
> The earth is all before me. With a heart
> Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
> I look about; and should the chosen guide
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way. (9–18)

Wordsworth goes on to recount scenes of boys catching birds in the woods, as well as of his early education. Stein's opening could be reread as addressing similar material of youth, education, and choosing as a form of liberty.

> I caught a bird which made a ball
> And they thought better of it.

But it is all of which they taught
That they were in a hurry yet
In a kind of a way they meant it best
That they should change in and on account
But they must not stare when they manage
Whatever they are occasionally liable to do
It is often easy to pursue them once in a while
And in a way there is no repose
They like it as well as they ever did
But it is very often just by the time
That they are able to separate
In which case in effect they could
Not only be very often present perfectly
In each way whichever they chose. (I.I.1–16)

Immediately following line 5, the unstated reference of the pronoun "they" seems to change entirely. Most importantly, from the inception of Stein's poem, "the difference is spreading."[13] Whether the difference can be usefully marked in relation to Wordsworth's long poems, Stein's earlier writing, or in relation to almost all previous poetics, it is passages like these and those below that make one realize all over again how enormously grateful one is that there was a Gertrude Stein who did the living and the composing she was doing when she did. For example, this:

Think birds and ways and frogs and grass and now
That they call meadows more
I have seen what they knew. (I.XI.44–46)

and this, reread through another lens. May/may is present as one of many moods:

In one direction there is the sun and the moon
In the other direction there are cumulus clouds and the sky
In the other direction there is why
They look at what they see
They look very long while they talk along
And they may be said to see that at which they look (I.XV.10–15)

"The long dull" autobiographical poem was certainly one template for *Stanzas,* as was the poetics of wor/l/d (life and letters) exploration. In the poem itself, Stein twice refers to the *Stanzas* as one of two autobiographical projects. There may as well be a doubling of that double. She could be referring either to the manuscript of *Q.E.D.* or to the other autobiography already on her mind, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.* In Part IV, Stanza XIII ends with this line:

This is an autobiography in two instances (IV.XIII.9)

The next stanza has this:

This is her autobiography one of two
But which it is no one which it is can know
Although there is no need
To waste seed because it will not do (IV.XIV.17–20)

Further down in this stanza Stein could well be referring to the book deal she has been negotiating with her American agent William Bradley: "They mean I like it if she will do it . . . And prepare to share wealth and honors . . . This is why they like me if they think they do" (IV.XIV.23, 36, 58). I've taken these lines from a long series of what seem to be ruminations on the immense publication break that has just come her way. After so many years of disappointment, a major

New York publisher, Harcourt Brace, is on the verge of giving her a lucrative contract for her autobiography, predicting that it will be a great literary and financial success. The next stanza (XV) continues in this vein with Stein wavering between self-confidence and doubt.

Ulla Dydo writes that while reading the notebooks that contain the original manuscript of *Stanzas,* she found that on the "inside cover of the fifth manuscript [notebook], for Part IV, Stein entered, barely legibly, with revisions, a descriptive title." The title was "Stanzas of my ordinary reflections. Stanzas of Poetry." Later, Stein crossed out "of my ordinary" and replaced the words with "of commonplace."[14] Why?—one might ask—on the threshold of the kind of speculation that is a reader's conversation with history. "Commonplace" has a more literary ring to it; moreover, the contents of the "commonplace book" of that time—a collection of noteworthy quotations from other writers—provides substantial personal distance from the material in the work. One begins to see *Stanzas* as a kind of negative (in the photographic sense) of what *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* will become. Or, perhaps, that moving from "ordinary reflections" to "commonplace" presages the long "quotations" of the narrator persona Alice B. Toklas. Something odd was definitely occurring. The commonplace as genre doesn't provide an accurate characterization of *Stanzas in Meditation.* Somewhere in the proliferation of heavily shaded overlaps—the Venn circles that can chart overdetermination—it becomes clear that though the autobiographical poem may well have been the starting point of *Stanzas,* this poetry is both eluding and exceeding that generic descriptor. In so many ways, it may have turned out to be something much more interesting—a somewhat dangerously charged, ex post facto reflection on *Q.E.D.* aspiring toward other, more liberating, forms of meditation.

V.

Meditation can be a sustained practice of considering; it is also a spiritual practice which requires emptying out one's sense of identity and distinct objects of concern. It is a giving over to what is not self possession. *Stanzas* contains hints of this use of meditative practice. The period in which Stein was writing *Stanzas* seems to have been one of dual crisis (troubled mind and turning point); the writing project functioned as location of daily reflection: the act of writing of the reflective mind-in-action as thought—the kind of writing that provides a transitional zone allowing one to do the work of sorting through difficult circumstances. Perhaps, difficult memories as well. The goal is to achieve stillness of mind, receptiveness, presentness in the moment. Here is an example where the language has moved toward meditation as spiritual exercise:

Curiously.
This one which they think I think alone
Two follow
I think when they think
Two think I think I think they will be too
Two and one make two for you
And so they need a share of happiness
How are ours about to be one two or not three.
This that I think is this.
It is natural to think in numerals
If you do not mean to think
Or think or leave or bless or guess
Not either no or yes once.
This is how hours stand still (IV.XI.28–41)

VI. CAN THE PRESSURE BE THE PLEASURE? A VAST HORIZON OF THEYS

> Of course then there are pronouns. . . . They represent some one but they are not its or his name.[15]

> Poetry is I say essentially a vocabulary just as prose is essentially not.[16]

Matters of vocabulary, such as the quantitatively remarkable presence of unattributed personal and impersonal pronouns in *Stanzas in Meditation,* suggest coordinates for the reader's geometry of attention. Moving through Stein's wordscape, always along the rim of occurrence, in serial patterns of denial and disclosure, there is never enough disclosure to conclude any given trajectory of occurrence. Not until the very last lines of the last stanza of the poem, and even then conclusion is not a revelation, or vice versa. The revelation is elsewhere, in the experience of reading as poesis (that is, making sense of words composed into forms, sense, meaning—the very heart of poetry as practice). Readerly poesis in the case of *Stanzas,* like most of Stein's poetic texts, is an act one can perform many times over, never exhausting the possibility of noticing new things. Noticing (exquisite forms of attention) is the vehicle of a reading poesis.

Could it be, then, that what has been viewed as a kind of deprivation—all that abstracted vocabulary—when one attends to, say, the rippling patterns of "they"s that become a graphic and sonic medium through which one navigates the wor/l/d of the poem, is actually what constitutes the pleasure, that is, the sensation-inducing pressure of the text? I'm not talking about masochism, but of the pleasures of finding one's knowledge and intuitions

about language fully necessary and fully charged by tantalizing ratios of presence and absence. In the course of exercising these capacities one is making meaning entirely specific to the word-site of the poem. What makes one an avid reader of Gertrude Stein is—in addition to the kinds of things I've quoted—the stimulating effect of puzzling, of figuring one's way through a text that absolutely requires developing a reading poesis specific to the composition and vocabularies that draw one along the rim of occurrence of the poem. As Leslie Scalapino has asserted, in an essay entitled "Writing on Rim," writing on the rim of occurrence is a form of *living* on the rim of occurrence. That is the form of life Stein chose and that we can choose as readers. Scalapino puts it in a way that is evocative of Stein's "This is how hours stand still":

> This eliminates the separation between writing and realistic rim.
>
> Also to push "it" to where even weariness causes it (no difference between weariness and the horizon and writing) to collapse on itself where it's still, visibly flapping.
>
> I wanted to get the writing to the point of being that still.[17]

But what about the pronouns? The "it" that Dydo discusses as so ubiquitous in *Stanzas,*[18] along with the "he," the "she," and—to my mind, most interestingly and disturbingly—the "they," together form other horizons, other perspectival perforations and limiting conditions in the experience of reading this work. Because my essay has had the purpose of demonstrating that a supposedly unreadable "masterpiece" can indeed be read, and many times over, and pleasurably, I'll end with a descriptive analysis of one possible reading of *Stanzas* as poesis in conversation with Stein's language, remembering that poesis, from the Greek, is to literally

make something out of the material at hand, which is—as Stein said of all poetry—vocabulary.

I think it can be safely said that nothing has disturbed readers of *Stanzas* more than its putative "abstraction," its "emptiness." These properties have been attributed to what Dydo has called "neutral words—'I,' 'she,' 'they'; 'be there,' 'be here.'" Yet, as Dydo delightfully notes, Stein can compose material enactments from just such words, as she "composes the rain" in these lines:[19]

> That rain is there and it is here
> That it is here that they are there
> They have been here to leave it now (II.I.7–9)

Those monosyllabic neutral words turn into limpid phonemes, clearly sounding as textual rain drops in lieu of adjectives or adverbs—an enactment of precipitation, not a description of it.

Stein was never given to adjectival mimesis. She achieved sensual specificity with her vocabularies rather than with images. But the deprivation so many readers have felt in their encounters with *Stanzas* has not only to do with the absence of descriptors, but with a dearth of the kinds of evocative and colorful words one finds in so many of Stein's otherwise difficult works. In *Stanzas* the most disturbing aspect is the predominance of unattributed pronouns. Of those, the personal pronouns minus referents are particularly bothersome. This poem has in it a vast horizon of Theys that describes both the limit of one's depth of field as reader and the potential of gazing beyond. That "beyond" won't, however, be a list of identities. "They," already plural, is multiplied to such an extent that it becomes in its steadfast opacity a force that powerfully affects the mood of the poem. The I seems not infrequently

oppressed by the presence of all those inscrutable (even hostile?) Theys.

I've had many questions about the Theys perched on line after line. What collective noun best suits them? Something like a murder of crows? A pride of lions? A school, a drift, a host . . . ? Or, is their presence more like that of a Greek chorus sporting megaphone masks in refusal of identity, perversely projecting their silence? The Theys at times behave linguistically like feared parental figures, fathers in particular. The patriarchal They abounds in "Patriarchal Poetry" of course, and in *History or Messages from History,* where one finds, "They were outstanding in coining words without women."[20] Other possibilities: the They of angry siblings, estranged or judgmental family members, stern teachers, scornful peers, a public that ignores one's work—but most of all the unknown in others. The alterity of the They or Them is often theorized as rendered other by the subject in the foreground. Here the I—and any of the rest of the first-person pronouns—can be instantly rendered other by the They. A good deal of the meditative work in *Stanzas* seems to be about situating the reflective subjectivity of an I between the I of self-love, self-confidence, certainty . . . and the I of self-doubt; both must negotiate an ominously indeterminate zone of "I and They." The "I-They" (with attendant "Theirs") can be at least as fraught as the "I-Thou."

Stein ended *How To Write,* her collection of pieces on grammar and vocabulary, with a section called "Forensics." This brings to mind the crime lab, the court—places where identity and culpability may be determined. *How To Write* was written from roughly 1927 to 1931. It was published in 1931, the year before Stein wrote *Stanzas.* Here are the final phrases of the concluding paragraph:

> In theirs. In unison. An advantage to forsake. Which they will. As they may glean. More facts. For which. By their ordinary values. They will be practically. As far apart. Forensics may be athirst for gold. It may with them battle and die. It can as much bequeath and condole. For them. To merit. That they. Should console. Them.[21]

In all three sections of *Tender Buttons* (the poem written in 1913 in exaltation of loving domesticity with a new wife) there are only six, perhaps seven, unattributed Theys. In *Stanzas in Meditation,* there are forty-seven (not counting "their"s and "them"s) in the first two stanzas of Part I alone. When the crowd of Theys suddenly clears, the I achieves meditative clarity, is confident again:

> I wish now to wish now that it is now
> That I will tell very well
> What I think not now but now
> Oh yes oh yes now.
> What do I think now
> I think very well of what now
> What is it now it is this now
> How do you do how do you do
> And now how do you do now.
> This which I think now is this. (V.VIII.1–10)

Stanzas ends with what sounds a bit like self-administered bucking up, but given what we know came next, the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and all that followed, it seems well placed:

> I will be well welcome when I come.
> Because I am coming.
> Certainly I come having come.
> These stanzas are done. (V.LXXXIII.11–14)

Notes

1. Stein, "Finally George A Vocabulary of Thinking," in *How To Write,* 293.

2. "Abstract" is the adjectival winner of the formalist characterization contest with respect to *Stanzas in Meditation.* To be abstract is to exist as thought or idea without a physical or concrete presence, hardly possible for a poem made of words.

3. I'm referring here to Wittgenstein's "language games" as forms of life conducted through words entirely embedded in everyday life.

4. See Turner, *Baby Precious Always Shines.*

5. I'm not talking about quantum physics, but something more like the pattern-bounded indeterminacy of complexity theory. Hence "particulate" rather than "particle."

6. See Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 5–6. "Context" rather than "biography" does, however, leave the coast clear for a denial of personally expressive aspects of the work.

7. For a full account of this textual drama—as well as much more about *Stanzas in Meditation* from Dydo's perspective, see her *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises.*

8. She and Alice had been having troubles; her persistent rejections by publishers and her tepid reception by readers were growing more and more intolerable.

9. Stein to Lindley Hubbell, August 25, 1931, quoted in Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 506.

10. Stein to Louis Bromfield, summer 1932, quoted in Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 507. According to Dydo, "These are Stein's only comments on the work in progress." There are of course comments in *Stanzas* itself calling the work autobiographical.

11. See also Dydo's discussion of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as determining influence on Stein's composition of *Stanzas.* Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 508ff.

12. Changed from "word" in manuscript to "world" in typescript. See textual notes by editors of this volume.

13. Last line of "A Carafe, That Is A Blind Glass" in *Tender Buttons,* in Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Selections,* 126.

14. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 489.

15. Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Lectures in America,* 213.

16. Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 231.

17. Scalapino, *Objects in the Terrifying Tense / Longing from Taking Place,* 74.
18. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 510ff.
19. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises,* 515.
20. Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Selections,* 264.
21. Stein, *How To Write,* 395.

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