

How to Have a Conversation With Gertrude Stein: An Essay in Four Steps

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Introduction

I was once at a lecture by Eve Sedgwick, who was talking about J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words*. Sedgwick was discussing Austin's endless meditations on the performative utterance "I do" that is a marriage, and all of the many ways in which it can go wrong; for example, two people are married at sea but it is not the captain who marries them, etc. She wound up this part of her talk by suggesting that the book's subtitle could easily be "I do–Not!" In titling this paper I have undertaken an exercise in a related genre; I plan to suggest a series of ways one might go about engaging in a conversation with Gertrude Stein, largely, in each case, by focusing on the ways that Stein makes it difficult, if not impossible, to do so. My focus will be on several short poems Stein wrote between 1929 and 1931, in the years just preceding her twinned books *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Stanzas in Meditation*, and on the *Stanzas* themselves. The *Autobiography*, published in 1933, is Stein's eminently readable account of her life in Paris as a young writer and art collector, and is well-known even among people who have never read anything else by Stein. *Stanzas in Meditation*, which she wrote simultaneously with the *Autobiography*, is a lengthy poem (151 pages in the Yale edition of Stein's unpublished work) that was not published until after her death in 1956 and remains somewhat notorious even among people who read a great deal of Stein. It has been persuasively argued that *Stanzas in Meditation* represents an alternative account of Stein's autobiography, one written in a Steinian language that is as uncompromising as the language of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is commercially palat-

able.¹ The *Stanzas* represent the culmination of her work in poetry, which she claimed began with *Tender Buttons*. The poems she wrote between 1929 and 1931, out of which the *Stanzas* specifically emerge, however, are much more directly engaged with the specific traditions of lyric form than were the tender buttons, and most especially with the construction of lyric "voice." It is in her play with those traditions, and specifically with the idea of an implied "I" that stands behind the lyric, that Stein most fully teases her reader with the possibility of "conversation."

In the face of the *OED*'s raft of tempting possibilities, I have chosen to center this paper on its most pedestrian definition of "conversation": "Interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk." Applying this definition to Stein's work in lyric poetry quickly suggests some of the contradictions inherent in her work. On the one hand, few other poets have focused so intently on the material particularity of words and the way they engage in "interchange" with thoughts, as Stein. On the other, few poets seem so disinclined to disclose their thoughts to use in a "familiar" way. Although, again, there is a sense in which Stein's work is almost relentless in its use of the familiar: familiar words, phrases, topics, etc. Stein herself called *Stanzas in Meditation* her "real achievement of the commonplace," and the reader can see the familiarity of Stein's lexical materials in any of the poem's lines.² To choose a few at random (a method Donald Sutherland recommends in his introduction to the *Stanzas*), consider the lines: "It is so easy to be often told and moved / Moved can be made of sun and sun of rain / Or if not at all."³ The tone of these lines is pleasant, the sentence reassuringly declarative in mood and simple in diction. The only thing missing, it seems, is a stable frame of reference to which to relate each of the clauses. Here, as so often, Stein's work tantalizes the reader with the sense that if only we were more familiar with her habits of expression, if we could through experience of the writing supply the missing reference, her impenetrable discourse would resolve itself into friendly conversation.

It is possible, however, to see the resistance of Stein's poems to yield an interchange with the reader's own thoughts and words as an index of how true they remain to the idea of lyric, first articulated by John Stuart Mill, as the "overheard" speech of the poet to himself. "Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude," he writes; "all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy."⁴ Anecdotal evidence from classroom discussions of Stein suggests that "soliloquy" is often the first description students have of what Stein is doing; she must be talking to herself because she does not speak at all to them. Paradoxically, however, in more conventional poems it is just this effect of a directly articulated singular consciousness that can lend a "conversational" feel to conventional lyric poems; the poet may be talking to him or herself, but the poem is designed to foster the reader's illusion that the poem speaks to, or for, or about, or at, or with her.⁵ The reader is invited into a conversation with the poem in the sense of the *OED*'s first, most encompassing definition: "the action of living or having one's being [including spiritual being] in a place or among persons." Stein's poems do not work like this, and the conversation they invite follows other lines. Specifically, they present distinct challenges to the nineteenth-century Romantic theory and practice of the lyric (of which Mill is one exemplar) with which they are also deeply engaged in three ways; first, by interrogating rather than assuming the presence of a stable, non-linguistic authorial "I." Second, by nevertheless insisting that poetry is identified chiefly by the "feeling" that made it; and third, by proceeding to locate that feeling not in the motions of the author's mind and heart but in the motions of language itself.

In discussing her engagement with Romantic writing I will concentrate on the affinities between her theory of poetry writing in "Poetry and Grammar" and the theories of Wordsworth, in his "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," and John Stuart Mill in his response to Wordsworth in "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties." In choosing to discuss Stein's relationship to this period I am in part following her hint in "Composition as Explanation" (1926) that con-

fronting Romanticism, indeed incorporating and subsuming and reinventing it for herself, was pivotal in the development of her work after 1914. Stein writes:

This then was the period that brings me to the period of the beginning of 1914. Everything being alike everything naturally would be simply different and war came and everything being alike and everything being simply different brings everything being simply different brings it to romanticism.

Romanticism is then when everything being alike everything is naturally simply different, and romanticism.⁶

Stein reiterates the importance of Romanticism to her work, and, startlingly, defines it anachronistically as part of her own development as a writer, near the essay's end:

In the beginning there was confusion there was a continuous present and later there was romanticism which was not a confusion but an extrication and now there is either succeeding or failing there must be distribution and equilibration there must be time that is distributed and equilibrated. (527)

There is a complex re-positioning of Romanticism as part of Stein's personal history at work in these passages. First, she defines it as a coda to her own revelation that "everything being alike is naturally simply different," a maxim she pushed to its limits in her use of repetition. In this way she avoids being indebted to an earlier literary moment by claiming to have arrived at it independently, discovering it for herself naturally in the course of her own thinking. Stein's famous, late definition of a genius as "some one who does not have to remember the two hundred years that everyone else has to remember" is suggestive in this context: Stein does not have to remember Romanticism because she can create it for herself when she needs it. Second, Stein immediately assures the reader that coming upon Romanticism was not a "confusion" but an "extrication." I understand this statement to mean that she is aware of and untroubled by the anachronism she is claiming in having been "brought to" Romanticism by her own practice, and that in inventing her own Romanticism as she did she was extricated by it from the impasse of her "contin-

ous present"; at the same time, she is claiming to have extricated herself from nineteenth-century Romanticism. In order to show you how Stein negotiates her affinities with and divergences from Romantic poetic language I invite you to take the first step into a conversation with Stein's work:

I. Introduce Yourself

One way to phrase the difficulty with much of Stein's writing is that it contains too much of Stein's self to leave any room for the reader's. Stein's older brother Leo, who was possibly her least sympathetic reader, first articulated this objection as a matter of the presence or absence of an "I." Stein reports that he said of her work "that it was not it it was I. If I was not there to be there with what I did then what I did would not be what it was. In other words if no one knew me actually then the things I did would not be what they were" (EA 60).⁷ Stein represents Leo's conviction on this matter as the turning point in their relationship: just as she herself is becoming convinced that she is a genius, Leo claims that she is nothing, in essence, but a bad conversationalist whose solipsism precludes meaningful exchanges. Leo's complaint is important because in its cranky way it identifies something crucial about what Stein attempts to do throughout her writing life: make writing that is "complete" within itself. Leo claims that she has failed in this project, that there is no "it," no work or writing as such, there is only Gertrude in her egotism. Take away the "I" that stabilizes this writing and what it "really" is, that is, a private language of a particular self, becomes nonsense.⁸

A variety of Leo's criticism, permuted into praise, appears today in the work of Stein's most appreciative and astute readers, who also find that a particular authorial presence makes her work legible. Most notably, Stein's identity as a lesbian has often become the primary authorizing fact of her writing. Elizabeth Fifer's contention is representative:

Behind the imperturbable exterior [of the self] . . . the real world is also embodied, questioning the self and identifying one of its incarnations, the socially prohibited lesbian The sexual self that admits its true subject cannot take its own preoccupation as a norm for all receivers of its message.⁹

Fifer's argument is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis; as such she reads Stein's "prohibited lesbian" self as one facet of an unconscious that is itself a conversation, "made up of . . . appeals and responses, of desires and interdictions" (466). Fifer's privileging of Stein's lesbianism as the "true subject" around which she organizes her close readings of Stein's writing is part of a larger critical project that has, in opposition to some of Stein's earliest critics, celebrated Stein's treatment of sexuality as an essential part of her literary innovation.¹⁰ Work has also been done that uses other facets of Stein's biographical presence as interpretive pivots, as in Maria Damon's treatment of Stein's Jewishness, and Kirk Curnutt's exploration of Stein's status as a celebrity.¹¹

Simultaneously, a number of critics find the primary source of value in Stein's work to be what they claim is her total rejection of "self" and allied categories of transcendental signification. For example, Robert Grotjohn, in an essay about Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry," claims that:

Stein refuses this lyric organization [in which the poem's voice "is single and generally speaks out of a single moment in time"] by subverting the singleness of the lyric voice, denying the possibility of eternalizing a moment, and rejecting the transcendence this eternalizing attempts.

Patriarchal poetry needs to be undercut because, in its emphasis on a single voice isolating single moments, in its desire to enforce a unitary meaning on what is strange, it has ignored the multiplicity active in the perceptual world The lyric asserts the selfhood of the speaker, while Stein's anti-patriarchal poetry . . . "doubles" "I" and "you," refusing to assert the priority of authorial selfhood.¹²

Peter Quartermain's exuberant reading of *Tender Buttons* asserts that Stein extends her critique of authorial selfhood to that of the reader as well:

The transformational strategies in which her writing abounds render impossible the reader's possession of meaning, for in rendering inaccessible to the

reader the customary contract with the author as authority it undermines the reader's sense of his/her own certainty as arbiter of the meaning of the text. Stein's attack on notions of clarity radically undermines our notions of knowledge: It is difficult to know what we know, or even that we know, for we can only see clearly (and therefore "know") what is static. Her writing, completely antiauthoritarian, cultivates its own indeterminacy of meaning because it takes place in and is part of a world that is itself indeterminate.¹³

My method will be more concerned with analyzing the grammatical "transformational strategies" that interest Quartermain than with the sort of psychological theory Fifer uses. However, in this essay I shall argue that Stein's engagement with traditional Romantic lyric in her poetry of the late twenties and thirties, specifically in her claims about the status of the authorial "I," is neither the wholesale rejection of Romanticism that Grotjohn posits, nor the unmitigated celebration of "indeterminacy" that Quartermain outlines; as I hope to show, Stein is often preoccupied with the primacy of her "authorial selfhood," and consistently interested in the ways words determine meaning moment by moment (especially when they show the parameters of that determinacy by making "mistakes").

Stein herself worried over the problem of what made her herself, and her writing itself, by coming back repeatedly to a phrase from Mother Goose, "I am I because my little dog knows me." As Stein puts it on her return to France in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1936), "I became worried about identity and remembered the mother goose I am I because my little dog knows me and I was not sure but that that only proved the dog was he and not that I am I" (EA 259). Stein's doubt and dismay at this possibility are further developments in an old history of investigating, celebrating, and exploiting the writer's ability to be, as a writer, non-identical with herself as a person. Her use of the Mother Goose phrase to consider the issue first appears in her work in 1929, in the "Saving the Sentence" section of *How To Write*, with a few important revisions. She asks in that text, "What is a sentence for if I am I then my little dog knows me" (HTW 19). When Stein re-writes Mother Goose she shifts the emphasis from the dog's certainty as the naive guarantor of authenticity, to an implicit question about the

ability of one consciousness to know the identity of another. That “I am I” becomes a conditional clause in her revision, suggesting the range of possible circumstances under which I am not I. If I am not “I” at any given moment, in any given situation, in any given text, then my dog may not in fact know “me” at all. This recognition is central to her experiments in composition. In the Henry James section of *Four In America* (1933) she writes:

I am not I any longer when I see.
 This sentence is at the bottom of all creative activity.
 It is just the opposite of I am I because my little dog knows me.

Richard Bridgman takes these lines to mean that “only as we transcend the subjective self, do we become creative. ‘Seeing’ represents a concentration upon something so complete that it excludes personal feelings” (242). This gloss points to the way Stein seeks to rigorously articulate the linguistic effects that constitute each person’s sense of “selfhood”; in this way she takes language not as the expression of an “I” that a little dog knows, but as its ever-shifting, playful, endlessly complex constitution in the moment of writing.

Stein’s sense of excitement at watching the center of a poem’s consciousness shift rather than remain still is expressed in one of her most famous maxims, from the “Rooms” section of *Tender Buttons*: “Act so there is no use in a center.” An example of a poem that acts in this way is “To The First Bird Which They Heard” (1929):

I
 They heard. The first bird.
 II
 They had already. Heard. The first bird.
 III
 It is nice having a white dog chase a white chicken.
 As yes.
 It is nice. That a white. Dog. Would chase. A white. Chicken.
 Better. Yes.
 IV
 It is very difficult. To wonder.
 Or better. For them.

To be. In addition.

Their pleasure.

It would be pleasant.

To send. More.

There.

But to be satisfied.

V

She and he.

Go together.

He rather.

VI

A first bird. Which. They heard.

VII

So that. They heard.

VIII

It is very much their choice.

To leave. It. To them.

IX

Having forgotten. That it was. Well. Worth. Their notice. They had been.

Finding. It pleasant. To listen. To him. Gardening.

X

He answered.

XI

They were immediately. Anxious. To have. Everything.

XII

A first bird. Was heard.

(SIM 235-6)

This short poem has, in essence, two plots. One involves the interaction of several characters and their feelings: a "they," a "bird," a "she," a "he," and a "him," and feelings of pleasure, anxiety, contentment, and ambition. The other is grammatical, and traces a shift in voice from active to passive: "They heard" to "was heard"; a shift in article from definite to indefinite: "The first bird" to "a first bird"; and the arbitrary play of a series of periods disrupting the stanzas into strangely emphasized phrases. These two plots are in tension; the former posits relationships of symbolical significance, temporal order, and emotional cause-and-effect that the latter undermines. For example, one possible way to read the poem is as the record of a speaker's engagement with the material of lyric tradition. In this reading the

poem starts with a "bird" whose morning song is matched by an internal song the poet has heard within herself; the poet then moves through an allusive stanza about her delight in the sensory details of the surrounding world (a white dog chasing a white chicken), arrives at her sense that she has something "more" to offer, a contribution to tradition to make, and ends with a sense of urgency about her task (their immediate anxiety).

Such a reading, however, demands the imposition of a linear continuity that that everything except the numbering of the sections themselves resists. For example, while "they" refers to a plausibly continuous plural subject, section five suggests that the pronouns "he" and "she" are interesting not because they together refer to a plural subject "they," but because they physically "go together" as words: the "he" disappears when laid over the "she." Similarly, section three proposes that the referential content of the declarative sentence "It is nice having a white dog chase a white chicken" is "better" when broken up to allow the period to assert itself all the way through rather than waiting tamely to punctuate the end of a supposed speaker's thought. Section twelve, in fact, ends the poem by doing away with the "subject" of the poem altogether; the passive voice of the final clause retroactively makes it possible that there have been many "they's" in the poem all along, and that the real action of the poem was not to construct a single story but to meditate on the many possible stories predicated on the happy coincidence of a rhyme between "bird" and "heard." Perhaps most importantly, the poem is a capacious space, receptive to and tolerant of errant motions of thought and language. The writing is not random but it is notably tolerant of any possibility opened by any word or phrase it contains. This quality can be both exciting and a drain on the reader's energy, particularly since, as in this case, conventional empathy and identification on the part of the reader are not only difficult to achieve, but fundamentally irrelevant. Nevertheless, while this sort of abstraction is definitive of Stein's poetry, it is not its exclusive mode. Richard Bridgman's claim that "'Seeing' represents a concentration upon something so complete that

it excludes personal feelings" is somewhat misleading. In "Poetry and Grammar," the final essay in Stein's 1935 *Lectures In America*, Stein defines poetry specifically as a repeated calling, motivated by passionate love; in other words, she defines poetry as matter of distinctly personal feeling.

II. Ask How She is Feeling

Gertrude Stein's essay "Poetry and Grammar" specifies three necessary components of writing: "knowing," "doing," and "feeling." "Knowing" is the first; the essay begins by asking, if not outright daring, the essay's addressee to take stock of what he or she knows:

What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose.

There is no use in telling more than you know, no not even if you do not know it.

But do you do you know what prose is and do you know what poetry is.¹⁴

As cautions to the reader these opening sentences tell us how much is involved in asking one question about writing: first, the one question immediately becomes two, as the question "what is poetry" can only be answered if "what is prose" can also be, which suggests what the essay will later make explicit: in order to know anything about any kind of writing one must know everything about every kind of writing. Second, these opening sentence-long paragraphs emphasize that what is important, what is "useful," is *knowing* what poetry is. Since the essay will later specify that "knowing" is the special and province of writers who have "long" written, a class that includes Homer, Chaucer, Whitman, and Stein herself, these lines will serve as a retroactive definitional difference between Stein and her reader: Stein can "know" what poetry is as her reader cannot, because only Stein is sufficiently "doing" writing (PG 233). In defining herself this way, as one who "does," Stein aligns herself with her medium, for "words have to do everything in poetry and prose" (PG 209). Only the parts of the language that "do" something are interesting to her. For example:

Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive. (PG 214)

Nouns, by contrast, are not interesting, at least initially, because

A noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it . . . generally speaking, things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them and so why write in nouns. (PG 210)

The answer will turn out to be that although nouns do nothing, they involve (as I will shortly explain) Stein's third key term "feeling." The act of feeling, unlike "knowing" and "doing," brings the reader into Stein's understanding of writing in general and poetry in particular. While it is unnecessary, in fact impossible, for the reader to know what Stein knows, it is essential that she nevertheless confirms that knowledge, a distinction Stein enacts with a series of performative utterances:

If you read my writing you will you do see what I mean. (PG 213)
You see of yourself how true it is that which I have just said. (PG 211)
[Periods] did not serve you in any servile way as commas and colons and semi-colons do. Yes you do feel what I mean. (PG 218)

Of particular importance is that the reader "feel" what Stein means, since, like the generation of Romantic poets and critics who preceded her, Stein defines poetry in terms of the "feeling" it involves and evokes. Although Stein initially dismisses nouns as mere static names, and therefore uninteresting, she later acknowledges that as names, nouns have a unique ability to summon feeling in the writer. She writes:

I have said that a noun is a name of anything by definition that is what it is and a name of anything is not interesting because once you know its name the enjoyment of naming it is over and therefore writing prose names that is nouns are completely uninteresting. But and that is a thing to be remembered you can love a name and if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the

name of anybody one loves. And so that is poetry really loving the name of anything and that is not prose. Yes any of you can know that. (PG 231-32)

In her emphasis on the primacy of the writer's feeling in making poetry Stein aligns herself squarely with the nineteenth century in the form of Wordsworth and John Stuart Mill. Wordsworth, in his "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*" writes that he made his poems by "fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" (1),¹⁵ a practice that recognizes that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and that "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, not the action and situation to the feeling" (6). Mill, responding to Wordsworth in 1833, agrees that "the object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions"; unlike science, which "present[s] a proposition to the understanding," poetry "acts . . . by offering interesting objects of contemplation to the sensibilities" (344). On the basis of these principles Mill asks, "who, then, shall we call poets? Those who are so constituted, that emotions are the limits of association by which their ideas, both serious and spiritual, are connected together" (356).

In *Tender Buttons* (1914) Stein solves the problem of the noun's dead-end function of naming by "re-naming" objects (and food and rooms) in a series of paragraphs (buttons) that invent a language of feeling and association. Stein calls this language "not unordered in not resembling," a reminder to the reader that creating conventional likenesses is irrelevant to her poetry; she is instead creating portraits invested with the emotional life of household things. That life is created by their interconnectedness, the way one object exists not in itself, but in relation to and differentiation from a thousand other things, thoughts, events, etc. For example, the button called A FEATHER reads:

A feather is trimmed, it is trimmed by the light and the bug and the post, it is trimmed by a little leaning and by all sorts of mounted reserves and loud volumes. It is surely cohesive.

This poem takes palpable delight in the way that a feather, trimming a hat, is itself trimmed (adorned, defined, made particular), by its interaction with “the light and the bug and the post,” and by the “mounted reserves and loud volumes” (of its wearer? of the cavalrymen it suggests?) that surround it. The poet’s pleasure in the feather’s capacity to be a lively part of the world and of language is summed up in the half-ironic final judgement: “it is surely cohesive.” Twenty-five years later, as Stein is writing the poems that precede *Stanzas in Meditation*, the focus of her emotion shifts, as does her technique. Where *Tender Buttons* creates verbal relationships that parallel the interconnected lives of objects, Stein’s later poems create verbal objects that parallel the shifting states of everyday feeling. These poems favor indefinite pronouns, plain words with fields of reference so wide that the reader’s attention must shift to the words themselves. The following passage from “Abel,” (1930) a poem that loosely considers gardening, cultivation, and sustenance, is exemplary:

What is the difference of thinking of two words or one word.
 He has gone to listen if there has been anything.
 Yes there has been something
 He will bring it back often
 Why do they put more there
 Because they asked him to do so.
 It is very touching to have individual beseeching.
 And she came in as she went.
 What is the difference between a wedding and waiting
 We waited for him they did not wait for them.
 A poem is one thing
 A play is one thing.
 Sitting in a garden is something
 Watching nothing is obliging. (SIM 227)

This passage invites the reader to make up accompanying narratives; its vagueness suggests many plots, characters, and motivations waiting just offstage, as it were. But taken to mean what it says, the poem suggests a perspective in which consciousness is not made up of ordered plots with specific characters so much as a shifting landscape of categories, such as “she,” “he,” “anything,” “something,” “a poem,”

and "a play." At the same time it reflects on the doubling in life and in language: it is grammatically correct to use one word where two people are meant, as in "she came in as she went," and it is also correct to hear two words where one is meant, as "a wedding" grows so easily from "awaiting."

If the "feeling" of this passage is distinctly banal, that is as Stein wants it. The purpose of this writing is to catch the motions of ordinary feeling; "vivid" feeling, to be sure, even feeling that permits the poet to "see into the life of things," but only because such feeling is ordinary and ubiquitous if only we read Stein and thus come to know it as such. Stein's materials are the linguistic "commonplace," and she uses them in the service of her ambition to understand the way we are built out of their endless rearrangements.

I. Ask How Her Writing is Going

Like Wordsworth, Stein is passionately interested in the motions of her own consciousness; unlike Wordsworth, however, she understands those motions to be governed by the motions of language on its own account. Throughout "Poetry and Grammar" she describes her experience of what language does as independent of, if simultaneous with, a writer's intent as she writes. As she puts it in her essay "Portraits and Repetition," "As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is the essence of its going."¹⁶ In "Poetry and Grammar" the movement "inside" written language is the interaction of the parts of speech and punctuation marks, and it is through watching those motions that we watch ourselves. As she says early on in the essay, "I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves. In that way one is completely possessing something and incidentally oneself" (PG 211). Sentences endlessly "diagram themselves" because each part of writing does what it does wherever the writer uses it; in other words, to misuse a part of speech is not to neutralize it, but on

the contrary to initiate the fascinating process of making a mistake. As I mentioned earlier, verbs and adverbs are especially interesting to her in this way because as she says, "Nouns and adjectives never can be mistakes can never be mistaken but verbs can be so endlessly, both as to what they do and how they agree or disagree with whatever they do. The same is true of adverbs" (211-12). Prepositions are similarly exciting, as they "can live one long life of being nothing but absolutely nothing but mistaken and that makes them irritating if you feel that way about mistakes but certainly something that you can be continuously using and everlastingly enjoying" (212). One example of an excitingly mistaken preposition may be found in a proposition she makes at the beginning of the essay, that "one of the things that is a very interesting thing to know is how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside of you" (209). The substitution of "to" for the expected "about" in the phrase "feeling inside you to the words" reminds the reader that the interaction between writer and language is dynamic; the writer has feelings that move *toward* the words and attach *to* the words, a feeling *for* words, a feeling *of* words, and so forth.

With respect to Stein's work in the genre of lyric poetry and its basis in the passionate feeling of an "I," however, the part of speech with the most rich capacity for shifting significance is the pronoun. In "Poetry and Grammar" she writes:

Pronouns are not as bad as nouns because in the first place practically they cannot have adjectives go with them. That already makes them better than nouns.

Then beside not being able to have adjectives go with them, they of course are not really the name of anything. They represent some one but they are not its or his name. In not being his or its or her name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything. (PG 213-214)

The capacity of pronouns to "be something" in and of themselves is perhaps the most consistent element of Stein's method in *Stanzas in Meditation*. The poem is built on three pronouns, "I," "they," "she,"

whose references shift each time Stein uses them. The first stanza introduces the "I" and "they" as well as the themes of play, authority, chance, intention, rest, and work, that will run through the rest of the poem:

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. (SIM 3)

The *Stanzas* are generally taken to chronicle Stein's domestic life and assessment of her own work up until that time. In particular, as I mentioned before, Ulla Dydo has persuasively argued that the *Stanzas* are Stein's private *Autobiography*. In this light her pronoun references often seem quite legible, as when, in Part IV, Stanza XIV, Stein writes,

She knew that she could know
 That a genius was a genius
 Because just so she could know
 She did know three or so
 So she says and what she says
 No one can deny or try
 What if she says. (SIM 71)

In these lines the "she" is Alice B. Toklas; they recount the well-known anecdote from the *Autobiography* in which Stein, writing as Alice, claims that Alice has met three geniuses in her lifetime, Pablo Picasso, Alfred North Whitehead, and Stein herself. However, when the *Stanzas* are most closely fulfilling Stein's stated ambition for them, an "I" has no more significance, is no more the center of the text than is "she" or "they." The text itself has no center around which arcs of story line or crises of emotion group themselves.¹⁷ The poem offers no

propositions to be compared to the reader's own knowledge and experience, no central persona with which to identify. Instead it offers something like a kit for perception, as in the following stanza:

Stanza XIV (Part II)

It is not only early that they make no mistake
 A nightingale and a robin.
 Or rather that which can which
 Can which he which they can choose which
 They can know or not like that
 They make this be once or not alike
 Not by this time only when they like
 To have been very much absorbed.
 And so they find it so
 And so they are
 There
 there which is not only here but here as well as there.
 They like whatever I like. (SIM 37)

This stanza manifestly enjoys language's irrepressible capacity to make its own sense, the ability of words to create sense as they are set next to one another in any order. However, the order is not random; it follows patterns of relationship marked by conjunctions ("or," "and") and "likeness;" it tests words in different contexts to see if they change, as in "that which can which / Can which he which they can choose;" it defines common words, so that "there which is not only here but here as well as there." These operations are the substance of the stanzas, and they create a text that presents the reader with the foundations of readability. This is part of what John Ashbery means in calling the poem "a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen."¹⁸ However, part of that "possibility" is also that Stein's alternately anxious and exalting presence as an author can move in and out of a text devoted to abstraction from just such ideas of authorship. Stein considers the interaction of language's sense-making capacities with the idea of "meaning" and authorship in terms that recall Wittgenstein:

Next to next to and does.
 Does it join.
 Does it mean does it join.
 Does it mean does it mean does it join.
 If after all they know
 That I say so. (SIM 139)

This stanza's conclusion, that "they" know that "I" say so, demonstrates one of the poem's many negotiations between its questioning of "I" as a pronoun like any other, and its representation of Stein's strictly personal investment in making claims for the value of what she says, is, and writes. In this way the *Stanzas* present a microcosm of Stein's entire body of work in which, as Bob Perelman claims:

Her imperturbable commitment to her daily practice of writing rather than to the quality of any particular bit of the product is the primary fact. There is a literalism and self-assertion to her work that is not easy to assimilate to aesthetic or literary-historical categories of judgement . . . And the "I" embodies the problematics of Stein's career: her seemingly endless output was not selfless meditation: she insisted on its value as masterpiece and her own value as genius.¹⁹

There is a pull throughout the *Stanzas* between their ideal of abstraction and their sporadic personal reference. These latter references take a number of forms. In addition to passages that may be read as referring to Stein's relationship with Toklas and their life together, there are numerous instances of Stein's commentary on her own writing that encourage a face-value reading:

This is an autobiography in two instances. (SIM 76)
 Leave me to tell exactly well that which I tell. / This is what is known.
 (SIM79)
 I could go on with this. (SIM 83)
 This whole stanza is about how it does not make any difference. (SIM101)
 If I am one I would have liked to be the only one / Which I am. (SIM 146)

In light of these quotations, especially the last one, it is too sweeping to claim, as Grotjohn does, that Stein "refuses the priority of authorial selfhood," or as Quartermain does, that her writing is "completely

antiauthoritarian." Her work both interrogates the foundations of her position as author and reserves the right to claim power as she occupies that position. Stein's pronouncements on her importance in twentieth-century writing are unequivocal; as certain as she is that creativity is predicated on the fact that "I am not I any longer when I see," she is equally certain in "realiz[ing]" that in English literature in her time she is the only one. She has always known it and now she says it" (ABT 94). A considerable part of the *Stanzas'* interest comes from Stein's frequent insistence on having it both ways; if she refuses anything definitively it is the obligation to be consistent. Stein is aware of the tax she levies on the reader's patience in making this refusal, as she makes clear in the final stanzas:

Stanza LXXXII

Thank you for hurrying through.

Stanza LXXXIII

Why am I if I am uncertain reasons may inclose.
 Remain remain propose repose chose.
 I call carelessly that the door is open
 Which if they can refuse to open
 No one can rush to close.
 Let them be mine therefor.
 Everybody knows that I chose.
 Therefor if therefor before I close.
 I will therefor offer therefor I offer this.
 Which if I refuse to miss can be miss is mine.
 I will be well welcome when I come.
 because I am coming.
 Certainly I am come having come.

These stanzas are done. (SIM 151)

In the poem's final stanza Stein formalizes the invitation she has offered to the reader all along: "I call carelessly that the door is open." The "door" Stein has opened may lie between her and the reader, between parts of speech and states of feeling, between grammar and

poetry; all one can know for sure is that a line of access and communication lies open to the reader who wants it. Her "careless" call, however, emphasizes that if the reader refuses to converse on her terms, she has nonetheless irrevocably established those terms: "Which if they can refuse to open / No one can rush to close." In defending the methods she has been pursuing throughout the *Stanzas* Stein turns finally to the risks she herself has taken in order to verify her good faith. She has laid herself open to the world: "everybody knows that I chose." The reader may or may not choose what Stein has chosen, but Stein does not need the reader's approbation to know that she herself has chosen well. Stein refuses to "miss" what her writing has taught her about language and subjectivity; if that teaching misses the mark then at least the "miss" is hers alone, a defiant claim that can be traced back to Job's assertion that "be it indeed that I have erred, mine error remaineth with myself" (Job 19:4).²⁰

Stein's triumph then, is not to have achieved a perfect disengagement from the lyric "I" and all of its implications. Some of those implications, especially as regard her demand for an individual, named place in history, suit her quite well. What the *Stanzas* do instead is to open out the possibilities of emotion and liveliness in poetic language, and to insist that sense is always being made, most of all when "mistakes" are also being made. When the *Stanzas* stick most closely to Stein's goal of total abstraction from any particular referent, ideas and descriptions arise in this text not as authenticating preconditions, but rather as the inevitable function of the text's materials. If the poems that make up this text tend toward soliloquy, in the way that Mill claims lyric poems do, it is because Stein is writing the essentially impersonal linguistic operations that make up anyone's interiority, including her reader's. To have a conversation with Stein's work is thus to acknowledge that her writing is, however unfamiliar it appears, in fact premised on the ceaseless, and egalitarian, "interchange between thoughts and words" that constitutes each one of us. Though her poems are playful, her purpose is not, and a sustained engagement with her writing necessitates a respect for the gravity of her

project; as Stein herself writes in *Henry James*, "I now wish to speak very seriously, that is to say, I wish to converse." For the reader who wishes to converse seriously on Stein's terms the rewards are considerable, and I follow her lead in suggesting a final step, which I address to you as well as to her:

IV. Say Thank You

University of Alabama

NOTES

I would like to thank the Research Committee at the University of Alabama for a grant that enabled me to write this essay.

¹Ulla Dydo, "Stanzas in Meditation: The Other Autobiography," *Chicago Review*, 35:2 (1985): 4-20. See also Susan Schultz's lucid account of Stein's self-authorization as "genius" in the *Stanzas* in "Gertrude Stein's Self-Advertisement," *Raritan*, 12:2 (1992): 71-87.

²Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933) 276; hereafter abbreviated as ABT.

³Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969): 101. All further poetry citations are from this volume and will be noted parenthetically in the text as SIM.

⁴J. S. Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. 1, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981) 348-49; all subsequent quotations from Mill are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁵"Anyone" is an eminently Steinian term, and the idea of her work being accessible to, as well as encompassing, "anyone" is primary among her ambitions. See Jennifer Ashton's thorough and illuminating discussion of Stein's engagement with "anyone" as a logical category in *The Making of Americans*. "Gertrude Stein for Anyone," *ELH* 64.1 (1997): 289-331.

⁶Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*, ed. Catherine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998) 527.

⁷Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Virago P, 1985) 60. (Original publication Random House, 1936.) All subsequent citations of this text are from the Virago edition.

⁸Leo's criticism frequently falls prey to the error that Mill describes as awaiting the insufficiently empathetic critic: "in such a case, a critic who, not having sufficient feeling to respond to the poetry, [and] is also without sufficient philosophy to understand it though he feel it not, will be apt to pronounce, not 'this is prose,' but 'this is exaggeration,' 'this is mysticism,' or, 'this is nonsense'" (363).

⁹Elizabeth Fifer, "In Conversation": Gertrude Stein's Speaker, Message, and Receiver in *Painted Lace and Other Pieces* (1914-1937)," *MFS* 34.3 (1988): 466, 468.

¹⁰For example, see Richard Bridgman's (*Gertrude Stein In Pieces* [New York: OUP, 1970]) now infamous judgement that "as she entered her forties, the demon of noon capered openly through her writing . . . Virgil Thompson has described it as concerning 'the domestic affections,' and so it is, luridly so" (149).

¹¹Maria Damon, "Gertrude Stein's Jewishness, Jewish Social Scientists, and the Jewish Question," *MFS* 42.3 (1996): 489-507. Kirk Curnutt, "Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.2 (1999-2000): 291-308.

¹²Robert Grotjohn, "Gertrude Stein and the Prose Long Poem," *Genre* 24.2 (1991): 179, 186.

¹³Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 23.

¹⁴Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) 209; hereafter abbreviated PG.

¹⁵William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

¹⁶*Lectures in America* 194-95.

¹⁷To the extent that sections of the poem have boundaries they arise from the physical dimensions of the notebooks in which Stein wrote them (see Dydo 10).

¹⁸John Ashbery, "The Impossible," *Poetry* 90.4 (1957): 251.

¹⁹Bob Perelman, *The Trouble With Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 130.

²⁰Surely too Stein is pleased that whatever happens, Miss Toklas is "hers."