Presence of Mind

A few years ago, in the newly redesigned Bryant Park, adjacent to the New York Public Library in midtown Manhattan, a statue of Gertrude Stein was set in place. The *New York Times* account of the event, not without a humorous aside, noted that except for the monument to St. Joan of Arc farther uptown at Riverside Park this was the only sculpture of a woman in a New York City park, not counting Alice in Wonderland and Mother Goose. The bronze statue of Stein, seated in one of her long skirts, probably brown corduroy, legs wide apart, shoulders slightly hunched over, was made in 1923 by her friend Jo Davidson, who admitted that he had made her into a modern Buddha. Perhaps such female companions are not so extraordinary for a woman who loved saints and, well, lived in a kind of wonderland with her own Alice. Besides, as the "Mother Goose of Montparnasse," she never hesitated to sprinkle a few nursery rhymes into her writing.

If city parks tend to be peopled with statues of the great men of history, literary biographies are filled with the great men of letters. Still, when one looks out over the vast field of twentieth-century literature, Gertrude Stein inhabits a landscape all her own. Provocation and confidence claim equal measure in her declaration that "the most serious thinking about writing in the twentieth century has been done by a woman." Herself.

Gertrude Stein had come to Paris to live in the early years of the new century and never stopped writing, completing her masterwork of almost one thousand pages, *The Making of Americans*, by 1911, though it

was not published until the mid-twenties. By that time she had already written *Three Lives*, *Tender Buttons*, and *A Long Gay Book*, and many, many portraits, plays, and stories. Since major publishers for the work were in short supply, and she suffered frequent rejection throughout her career, Stein published several books in her own Plain Edition, set up with proceeds from her sale of Picasso's *Girl with a Fan*, and elsewhere when she could find the support in independent literary magazines and presses in America, England, and France.

It was in 1913, in Mallorca, where Stein and her beloved Alice B. Toklas would later return to escape World War I, that she began to write plays. *What Happened* was the first of a long list that would number perhaps eighty (the exact figure is yet to be determined) by the time she completed *The Mother of Us All* in 1946, the year she died. Only a small selection of her plays have ever been produced, and Stein had to wait twenty years before she saw one of them on the stage, the now legendary production of *Four Saints in Three Acts*. She was sixty years old.

Stein's first triumph in the theater coincided with her return to America in 1934 after an absence of three decades. By now she was a well-known figure in progressive artistic and intellectual circles, her reputation enhanced by the best-selling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published in America the year before her arrival. *Four Saints* had its premiere at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, before moving on to Broadway and then Chicago, where she saw it. She and Toklas were met at the dock by scores of reporters who had come to cover the event for the New York dailies. The famous Gimbel's department store featured a window display of "Four Suits in Two Acts." Stein herself marveled that cab drivers and shopkeepers recognized her on the street. The *New Yorker*, among several newspapers and magazines, featured a cartoon of the opera, and the New York Times building announced "Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York" in revolving lights.

Four Saints, which was to become a starting point for the American art theater tradition, brought together the ingenuity of Virgil Thomson, who composed the music, the producer-director John Houseman, Stein's painter friend Florine Stettheimer, who designed the sets and costumes, and the young choreographer Frederick Ashton. Thomson chose an all-black cast to sing the opera, for which Maurice Grosser had written a libretto based on the Stein original. Stark Young, one of

America's most sensitive theater critics, was moved to write of the production: "But only now and then in the theatre can we hope for something of the quality of a thing in nature (a tree, a melon, a sheet of water, a flight of birds). The point in such a case is not that it is beautiful or not beautiful, but that it lives in itself."

In her joyful miracle play Stein brings together the writer's life and the saintly life as illuminated texts, her own and St. Therese of Avila's, synchronizing modern Paris and baroque Spain. For Stein genius is a form of sainthood, and the contemplative or spiritual life of writer and saint a state of grace. In a fabulous subversion of plot *Four Saints* incorporates the process of writing as part of the opera itself, moving between the documentation of Stein's attempt to shape the work and the composition that is the result of that process. Real time is integrated into dramatic time. "How many saints are there in it," St. Therese asks. More and more saints are added, until there are over two dozen. "A great many saints can sit around with one standing." Stein continually interrupts the narrative with new ideas for the play on weather, birds, flowers, objects, or stage directions. As the "plot" of a play unfolds, it becomes clear that the plot of a garden, St. Therese's *hortus conclusus*, is also being elaborated. The allegorical *Four Saints* works as a composition in both the literary and the horticultural sense, revealing a formal garden conceived as a plan of knowledge. This work remains Stein's great achievement of the play as landscape.

When one considers *Four Saints*, or indeed any one of Stein's plays, alongside the more conventional successes of the period, the originality of her dramaturgy is breathtaking. Stein had no antecedents in the English language, and even within the context of the European avant-garde between the wars her dramatic style remained unique. The 1933–34 New York theater season featured productions by the Theatre Union, Theatre Guild, and Group Theatre, in addition to the standard Broadway fare, such as O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, Maxwell Anderson's *Mary of Scotland*, Sidney Howard's *Dodsworth*, and Sidney Kingsley's *Men in White*, which won the Pulitzer prize. There were also several Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, the Kern-Harback musical *Roberta*, and plays by Ibsen and O'Casey. The following season two important dramas opened: *Waiting for Lefty*, by Clifford Odets, and *The Children's Hour*, Lillian Hellman's debut in the theater. The serious dramatists on this

list constituted (and still do) what was considered the "modern theater" of the day. Stein has never fit comfortably into American theater history, and even today her presence in the university theater curriculum, much less on the country's stages, is more the exception than the rule.

As early as her first play, *What Happened*, Stein had decided that a play didn't have to tell a story. What happened was the theater experience itself. In other words, the creation of an experience was more important than the representation of an event. Stein had already eliminated nouns in *Tender Buttons*, deciding that she could make a portrait of an object without naming it. Around the same time in the visual arts, Marcel Duchamp gave up conventional painting to create art that was more conceptual. Both artistic giants of this century were to challenge the habits of the eye and mind and to frustrate memory—in Duchamp's understanding, "to reach the impossibility of transferring from one like object to another the memory imprint." If for Duchamp it was the viewer who completed the work, Stein shifted attention from the text to the reader (or spectator). In every sense, the perceiving intelligence took precedence over the art object, whose status as an autonomous, self-contained totality was diminished. The observer and the art object were not separate but interdependent, making art and life indistinguishable. In this way, both artists welcomed the "ready-made," the everyday, into their works, becoming part of the century-long avant-garde search for the real. Ironically, the rose figures in both artists' statements of identity: for Stein, her rose that is a rose, and for Duchamp, his Rose Selavy. Stein's virtual theater was an attempt to eliminate anecdote in order to conceive a drama that placed supreme value on the experience of the mind, and therefore presence, or, in her sense, the continuous present. She was always more interested in existence than in events. From the start, then, Stein and Duchamp recognized the significance of audience in the modern art experience, and now at the end of the century it is even more apparent how strongly modernity and spectatorship are linked in our era.

In the same period, Stein began to define her notion of the play as a landscape in a radically original book of nature trope. This spatial conception of dramaturgy elaborates the new, modern sense of a dramatic field as performance space, with its multiple and simultaneous centers of focus and activity, replacing the conventional nineteenth-

century time-bound, fixed setting of the drama. The effect is a kind of conceptual mapping in which the activity of thought itself creates an experience. A more expressive understanding of this idea is the Roman sense of the mind as a field, that is, site of cultivation. Now part of the common vocabulary of contemporary practice, the concept of performance space, which opposes the character demands and causality of setting, really begins with her theater. Another way to clarify this difference is to distinguish between macro-space and micro-space. Thornton Wilder, Stein's friend and admirer who wrote more than one preface to her works, also understood, albeit less expansively, what experimenting with performance space could mean to theatrical vision, as his own plays demonstrate. Maeterlinck had been moving drama in this direction, breaking down conflict-based action in favor of a more static, repetitive structure founded on sense perception. Chekhov, who brought a new quality of light into drama, made early, tentative steps toward a pictorial, more open theatrical space, especially with *The Seagull*, which he described as "four acts and a landscape." It is tempting to speculate that the special interest Stein, Maeterlinck, and Chekhov took in the natural world influenced their new understanding of space in the theater, leading to contemporary conceptions of landscape and performance space. Any attempt to articulate a modern ecology of theater, which necessarily begins with the study of space, must surely explore their work as a starting point.

In her 1934 essay "Plays," which she wrote before seeing *Four Saints* staged, Stein attempted to explain what she meant by considering a play a landscape. "In *Four Saints* I made the Saints the landscape. All the saints that I made and I made a number of them because after all a great many pieces of things are in a landscape all these saints together made my landscape. . . . A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into my landscape the things that were there." A landscape is made up of things and people to be viewed in relation to each other. It doesn't have to come to you; you must discover for yourself what is there. This pictorial composition replaces dramatic action, emphasizing frontality and the frame, flatness and absence of perspective. The play is just there. It has no center. Whatever you find in it depends on your own way of looking. Similarly, if you observe a view outdoors, the landscape seems stationary, yet life or

inanimate objects are moving inside the part of it your eyes frame. Little by little you see and hear more, until everything reveals an expressive quality. This scene, like Stein's landscape, makes itself known to you according to your individual powers of perception: you complete the view.

Stein was not concerned with creating a drama, but an image. In her world, seeing has nothing to do with remembering, which is why she wanted to negate memory and intensify the present, continuous sense of becoming in space. This affirmation of space and ontological process underlies the phenomenological thinking Stein brought into the theater, with its emphasis on observation and description, and the perception of an activity rather than its definition. She instinctively knew that modernity had to do with looking. Likewise, Stein was impressed by the cinema's ability to generate rapidly changing images that made it difficult to remember previous ones, and she liked to play with the idea of photographs as frames and suggestive sights that also confounded the past and present lives of images.

"Plays," one of the most remarkable essays written by an American playwright, though little-known, takes as its subject audience perception of theatrical experience. Here Stein considers the relation of sight and sound to emotion and time, rather than story and action. She refuses the classical ideals of catharsis and *communitas*, posing instead a non-Aristotelian drama that proceeds as a philosophical inquiry into mind, perception, and being-in-the-theater. How does one see and hear, do they affect each other, and what is the role of memory in representation? What has time to do with knowing? She situated the problem of reception at the center of her investigation: how does textual knowledge differ from performance knowledge. Like her mentor, William James, who was her teacher at Radcliffe College in the 1890s, Stein understood consciousness as a rhythm, the constant process of change. She had a similar probing, empirical style when it came to questions of human thought, as if to corroborate James's contention that "the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities."

Stein never stopped asking questions of dramatic form, and virtually every one of her plays poses them in a different way. Even the text on the printed page announces itself as a unique spatial composition, each play evolving another arrangement of words and sentences and sounds. She loved series of words and the fragment, preferring parts to the whole (it

made the modern sensibility) and, perhaps mindful of her reputation, explained that repetition was actually insistence. Her advice in *Tender Buttons*, to "act so that there is no use in a centre," applies equally to her plays. Between the start of her interest in the theater and the premiere of *Four Saints*, she wrote plays that consist of lists, objects, letters, sentences, and aphorisms. Their characters include cities, circles, religions, mountains. Acts or scenes could speak, and often there are many of them in the plays, just as in her stories Stein made fun of the more traditional literary propensity for long tomes of many chapters and volumes. Sometimes an interlude, a narrative, a nursery rhyme would drift into a play, perhaps lily of the valley, or a bird. Then there are the Stein friends who appear as characters, at times alongside historical, political, and literary figures or saints. In one sense, a grand theme of her work and life is making acquaintance. Not knowing who the people in the plays are only makes them more charming and their tales no less beguiling than the stories of strangers. An extraordinary sense of good humor and playfulness comes through the work, showing just how much Stein loved to experiment with dramatic form. It isn't the meaning that counts, but what happens and how.

Anyone or anything can make a play. *Photograph* is simply the construction of an image. *A Play Called Not and Now*, made up entirely of stage directions, has characters who all look like famous personalities. *Short Sentences* is precisely that. In *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* narrative passages alternate with dialogue, a ballet of lights, and a singing dog. A complicated play such as *Listen to Me* unfolds like a detective story, one of Stein's favorite genres. Characters seem to get lost in the play and wonder how many acts, or characters, it actually has. "I feel I know now what a play is there are many kinds of them," she teases in *Byron A Play*, which is a play about writing plays. Stein always rearranged the elements of dramatic structure and laughed at the idea of acts, scenes, chapters, pages, and volumes, which she spread throughout her plays, frequently disregarding numerical sequence and breaking any linear flow by moving from the exaggerated buildup of some scenes to the brevity of others or to the constant interruption of the curtain. She loved to frame events and used photographs, doorways, windows, curtains, words, portraits, and interludes as framing devices. Who would have guessed that silence is windowful. Stein was obsessed with trying

to contain an image or an activity within a frame or stage picture. What you see is what you know, sight is insight. The lessons she learned from painting grounded all her literary studies, organizing her work in the forms of portrait, still life, and landscape. Like her contemporary Brecht, Stein created a dramaturgy that would bracket consciousness, but if his aims were pedagogical and political, hers were experiential and formal.

Within her frame Stein played constantly with the idea of the authorial voice, the author's intention, and authority. Her plays demolish arguments about the correct way to do a play, because the relations among author, text, reader, and spectator are confounded by the structures of the works. More often than not it is unclear who is saying what, what is a stage direction, what a speech, and who or what a character. Perhaps the water faucet in the early *Turkey and Bones and Eating* is a character and not part of a stage direction. Who can know? Usually there is only a voice or voices in a work. But whose? Are they male or female, animate or inanimate, and does it matter? Early in the century, Stein rethought the dynamics of voice/text, of reading/staging. Two very different kinds of modernists, both English-language writers who came to live in Paris, Stein and Beckett have been the dramatists most concerned with voice in this century, in part due to their philosophical meditation on the question of ontology.

One of Stein's great dramaturgical innovations was to incorporate aspects of daily life around her into the actual writing process, in this way bringing together documentary time and dramatic time and introducing a new narrative approach to autobiography and the personal in the theater. Remarkably, she managed to make domestic space the scene of avant-garde writing, and bourgeois comfort seem bohemian. Stein's texts were always open to the world in which everything was experienced as continuous delight. Any activity, if it occurred at home in the city of Paris or at Bilignin in the Rhône country, whether a birthday party, a walk in the garden, looking in shop windows, watching a cow in a meadow, or eating dinner with friends, anything could find itself a part of a play. Pansies, roses, dogs, butterscotch ice-box cookies were there too, and bird song mingled with conversation, lamplight with the moon. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein confides: "She was much influenced by the sound of the streets and the movement of the automobiles. She also liked then to set a sentence for herself as a sort

of tuning fork and metronome and then write to that time and tune." It was essential to create the perfect spatial configuration of a sentence, the rhythm of anyone's personality.

Stein viewed all aspects of writing as natural phenomena, things existing in themselves, the time in and the time of a composition. She absorbed everything around her and turned it into writing. After her trip to America she observed, in *Narration*, that "anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear, anybody is as there is wind or no wind there." That sense of living in writing and writing living is what gives her work its organic quality. Earlier in the century John Dewey described this coming together of art and experience as the natural history of form, though for Stein it could just as well be the natural history of writing. The world of Stein's words is biocentric, encompassing with equanimity the lives of all species in a continuous present of boundless space and time. She always tried to find the exact word for the air and sky and light and people and to describe precisely their climate of existence. Her plays are site-specific, she herself a site-seer.

In her nonhierarchical approach Stein rescued the commonplace as subject matter. Sherwood Anderson, who wrote the introduction to her *Geography and Plays*, instinctively understood her accomplishment, which he praised in this marvelous passage in the book: "For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words. Here is one artist who has been able to accept ridicule, who has even forgone the privilege of writing the great American novel, uplifting our English speaking stage, and wearing the bays of the great poets, to go live among the little housekeeping words, the swaggering bullying street-corner words the honest working, money saving words, and all the other forgotten and neglected citizens of the sacred and half forgotten city."

Stein gave herself an extraordinary amount of freedom to experiment in dramatic form, even if one considers the number and quality of theatrical works produced around her. On the European continent, especially in the period between the two world wars, when Stein wrote the vast majority of her plays, in addition to the volumes of poetry, portraits, fiction, memoirs, and essays, her playwright contemporaries included Maeterlinck, Pirandello, Brecht, Lorca, Witkiewicz, Girau-

doux, and Kaiser; and in Great Britain, Shaw, O'Casey, and Yeats. The more aggressively avant-garde poet-playwrights of Europe and the Soviet Union, namely, Marinetti, Mayakovsky, Tzara, Khlebnikov, Apollinaire, Schwitters, Breton, and Aragon, were revolutionizing the word and the image. Isadora Duncan, Nijinsky, and Mary Wigman were imagining modern dance, and Cocteau, Picasso, and Satie, a new artistic theater. If elsewhere in France Artaud declared, "No More Masterpieces," Stein, who sometimes referred to them as "mater-pieces," was asking, what are they and why are there so few of them. By 1920 she had witnessed three of the most famous artistic events of the early twentieth century: Henri Rousseau's notorious banquet, the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and the staging of *Parade*.

In Paris the air was filled with the talk and art of cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and the last vestiges of symbolism. It would be a disservice to Stein not to read her in the context of these literary and visual styles, though cubism is the only one she acknowledged as an influence on her work. Ultimately, her own writing had a longer list of words-in-freedom than the futurists' accomplishments, and just as their leader Marinetti's work had symbolist roots, Stein too wondered what made a word a word. Was it made by the meaning of the word or the word itself. If you looked at something, did you see sound, and how did image and sound relate? Though she always preferred facts to symbols, Stein pursued in radical directions the symbolist interest in the relationship of words and sounds and space, along with the disinterest in naming, which led to abstract art. She extended much further the significance of the poetic voice and the polyvocality of the symbolist aesthetic, creating more languages of the stage, more voices, than the symbolists ever dreamed. The drama of perception, the drama of the individual mind, and the self-dramatizing characters of symbolism, as they begin to create the avant-garde and the idea of conceptual performance, are elaborated in Stein as the beginnings of performance art in this century. And here too is the discovery of the compositional field that would later define performance space. Generous in recognizing Stein's central place among the makers of modern literature and its important movements, more than sixty years ago the critic Edmund Wilson celebrated her accomplishment in "registering the vibration of a psychological country like some human seismograph whose charts we haven't the training to read."

If some aspects of symbolist and futurist literary pursuits can be traced in Stein's work, she was never a member of any movement. They were simply a part of the intellectual milieu of her time, particularly the infatuation with the senses and individual response. Her writings were not printed in the infamous avant-garde journals and magazines of the day. And even though she counted friends among the dada and surrealist poets and painters, she was not one of them. She worshipped rational thought and the mind and went out of her way to distance herself from any connection to automatic writing. Consciousness was her theme, not the unconscious. Their leftist politics, defiant gestures, and attraction to deformation and dream states, especially their pornographic interests, did not attract her. Nor did she frequent their cafes. She preferred the tranquility and routine of bourgeois life.

The most open minds of the age came to Paris, from numerous European countries, America, Great Britain, South America, and Russia, to discover, perhaps like Stein, that it wasn't what Paris gave you but what it didn't take away. They had all gone there to create the twentieth century or see what it looked like from the Eiffel Tower. Many of them visited 27 rue de Fleurus, where she lived, surrounded by good food and sturdy furniture and the paintings of Cézanne and Picasso, whose broken lines and shifting planes she would follow into her own writing. Years later, after she had been to America and first flown in an airplane, in a moment of deep reflection Stein observed:

> When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves. I saw the simple solutions of Braque, I saw the wandering lines of Masson, yes I saw and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it, but he is contemporary and as the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had.

Thinking of her own sense of contemporaneity, she decided, "It made it right that I had always been with cubism and everything that followed after."

Still, Stein was always a different kind of modernist. She did not turn against the mind or set in conflict mind and body. Her writing is so sexual, her relationship with Toklas so often quoted and sexually coded, if ever there was a writer for whom textuality is sexuality, it is Stein. But her writing is sexual, not sensual, for it revels in declaration, not desire. In more ways than one her life is an example of the continual search for pleasure: of the text, of the word, of the body, of the world. Stein's body of work, and truly it is that, is a virtual catalogue of pleasures, enjoying a playful, celebratory lesbian erotics that is a marvel of formal invention.

Stein did not oppose nature and culture or reject the idea of civilization to exalt the primitive. She was not given to despair or pessimism or nihilism, nor did she search for mystery or transcendence. She manifested no real anxiety of the age or psychological malaise. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she was interested in the world more as paradise than as wasteland, in the miraculous, not the tragic. Unusually for her time and milieu, she was absorbed in the study of emotion and beauty and intuition in artistic experience. Stein represented, in her way, a heroic modernism that was still bound to Enlightenment values and even more so to an American optimism. That she loved the things of the world gave her work a special bliss and abundant sweep. In a Whitmanesque way she explored the tension of the self as a world and the self in the world. Stein had Whitman's expansive breath, which accounts for the primacy of the voice in her work, carrying his legacy of the human voice, the feeling of speech as song, into the theater.

There was much of the nineteenth century in Stein, something of the monumental. "I was always in my way a Civil War veteran," she once characterized herself. It seems fitting that for a woman who always wanted to be "historical" one of the works she is best remembered for, *The Mother of Us All,* unfolds with all the pomp and oratorical flourish of a historical pageant, with Susan B. Anthony at its head. The opera's famous refrain, "when this you see remember me," has been echoing for nearly fifty years, along with the equally insistent "listen to me," the two phrases articulating here and elsewhere the tension between seeing and hearing in the theater that so preoccupied her. Finally, at the end of her life, Stein brought together the writer's struggle and the feminist struggle. Before she moved to Europe her theatergoing had consisted mainly of old melodramas, operas, and touring companies of the clas-

sics and nineteenth-century repertoire. She always retained her love for melodrama, which she managed to update through the detective story to make some of her plays interrogate their own structure. For her the writing process was like the movement of a detective story: who did it, what was done, how it was done.

But Stein's nineteenth-century quality was demonstrated most rigorously in her passion for classification, the grammar of things existing: how to know everything there is to know about parts of speech, a punctuation mark, narration. She disliked the question mark. If you don't know a question is a question, what's the use. To her, commas seemed rather servile. "A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it." She loved long, complicated sentences that forced themselves on you and made you know yourself knowing them. Stein tried to write the history of everyone in *The Making of Americans*, to know how any one is that one. Her work in its own way continues Mallarmé's desire to contain all of human existence within a book. She also shared the symbolist ideal of an art of grace and godliness, mindful that writing is a kind of sacredness. Mallarmé's words on the page with space and sound around them, as Stein's would later, floated in a meditative space, all mind. This is the source of their spiritual energy. Her own book of the world would be energized by a series of difficult sentences that start off, back up, and move in several directions, stopping from time to time, like an afternoon walk in the city. "The pleasure of concentration on the final simplicity of excessive complication" was what Stein wanted from the sentence. She would write the hymn of repetition.

Gertrude Stein, a dictionary. The young girl who sat reading in the window seat at the Marine Institute Library in San Francisco never lost her voracious reading habit. But Stein, it seems, was not widely read in French and wrote next to nothing in that language. "One of the things I have liked all these years is to be surrounded by people who know no english. It has left me more intensely alone with my eyes and english." The life work she set for herself was to render experience in precise English and to live inside this language as if it were her home.

Mainly, Stein tried to live her life in looking. The intensity of existence was what occupied her. She always preferred looking to remembering, hoping to bypass memory, which is to say, the consciousness of

having previously experienced or thought about a fact or event, a person or object. Knowledge should proceed from the activity of being totally absorbed in the present moment of looking at someone, something. That is why Stein valued what she thought of as the flatness of the human mind, its continual presentness, over the contours of human nature, which she considered to be representative of the past, of memory. Experience was privileged over history. Her long meditation *The Geographical History of America,* which grew out of her experience of flying over the United States, takes up the theme of difference between the human mind and human nature. A great part of this complex book, in its own search for definition, concerns itself with identity and the nature of writing and the desire to make a play of just the human mind, that is, the drama of thinking, intercutting philosophical passages with short plays and occasionally addressing, or referring in the text, to Thornton Wilder, who wrote the book's introduction. Indeed, shortly after the work was published the dramatic sections were presented in Detroit as a puppet play, *Identity A Poem.* The idea of geography, as state of mind or place and personal mapping, is a major theme of Stein's writing. Her earliest plays are gathered in a volume she called *Geography and Plays,* and after her American tour she again used *geography* in one of her book titles. If landscape refers more to her notion of a play, geography describes her nondramatic works. The play inside the frame (landscape) and the land mass outside it (geography) are different spaces of consciousness, but each is a site/sight of knowledge.

Stein was always concerned with identity. Her success with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and the triumphal visit to America caused her to be anxious about the demands of celebrity. "Was I I when I had no written word inside me." Yet here was a woman who wrote largely in isolation and suffered years of neglect. (It is interesting that in the same period, in one of the last plays he wrote, *When Someone Is Somebody,* Pirandello also took up the increasingly modern subject of the author/celebrity and the public.) A few years after her months of traveling, lecturing, and partying coast to coast as the famous Gertrude Stein, and after completion of *The Geographical History of America,* she wrote the opera *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights.* In this seemingly whimsical but exquisitely personal tale, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, one or two women, is bitten by a viper in the woods, then gains the knowledge

to turn night into day. Now that a woman can do it, Faust isn't the only one. Against the setting of her growing reputation and the commitment at last of a distinguished American publishing house, the prolix Stein reflects on empowerment and vision, the soul and sin, recasting the Faust legend as a drama of contrasting light (daylight, electric light, candlelight, sunlight, starlight, twilight, moonlight, lamplight). Like many artists in the early decades of this century, she used light as theme, theology, technology. In one of Stein's fabulous frames, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is revealed behind a curtain, an artificial viper (now a symbol of cosmic, female energy) beside her and a halo above her, lit by candlelight—as if she were a saint. A grand ballet of lights appears, and with a charming touch of self-irony a voice announces:

> They come from everywhere
> By land by sea by air
> They come from everywhere
> To look at her there.
> See how she sits
> See how she eats
> See how she lights
> The candle lights.

Was Stein thinking about her life at rue de Fleurus?

Ultimately, Faust's electric light cannot compare to Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel's candlelight. He has sold his soul for this kind of light (art), but no one is interested in it anymore. There are other ways of seeing (knowing). Darkness envelops him as the opera draws to a close, but Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel finds her own way clearly lit: "I can be anything and everything and it is always always alright."

In Stein's hierarchy of feeling, foremost was the desire to know all there was to know about the life of writing, about life as writing: the conduct of life made a composition. For her the writer's life is the good life. In this way she brought together the ontological and the epistemological. What Marguerite Yourcenar once observed pertains just as well to Stein: "To some extent every writer has to balance the desire to be read against the desire not to be read." No understanding of Stein is complete without an awareness of her real subject matter: the writing life as a spiritual struggle with the materiality of words. A study of her

work is the study of process, not object. In the final analysis, it is this emphasis on process, and the unwavering commitment to experimentation, that has been so decisive a factor in the longevity of interest in Stein by vanguard artists in America.

Now, as the half-century anniversary of her death approaches, it is indisputable that Gertrude Stein is the great American modernist mind. No author has been a more inspirational figure for more generations of nonmainstream artists in the worlds of theater, music, dance, poetry, painting, and fiction. This is not to say that Stein has generations of imitators or that a Stein school is easily traceable. Instead her influence has been that of a visionary presence hovering over the artistic landscape, radiating a grandiose personal freedom, delight in invention, and intellectual courage. For decades this patron saint of the avant-garde has provided an example for those who came after her of the space an artist can make for herself in the world and of the manner in which an artist can create a new world in a work. Even a cursory outline of the history of contemporary performance in this country establishes her as one of the strong links between modernism and the evolution of an American aesthetic in the postwar period. The performance art and new opera/music theater lines begin with the influence of her work for the stage. Just as Stein's writing to a great extent developed from her reflections on painting, so the most innovative performance work was influenced more by art-world values than by American theater traditions.

The beginnings of the American avant-garde, in any formal, educational sense, were at Black Mountain College, where European avant-garde drama and American poetic drama had been introduced to the artistic community. Charles Olson, one of the Black Mountain poets, defined the composition by field of his "Projective Verse" in a geography of spirit that resembled Stein's. John Cage, who was there after the war, had written music to Stein texts by the 1930s, as had Virgil Thomson a decade earlier. Coincidentally, when Cage began to compose music he was in Mallorca, the same place Stein began to write plays. By the end of the forties *The Mother of Us All*, with Thomson's music, had its premiere at Columbia University and Stein's work was appearing in volumes published by Random House and in Selden Rodman's widely read *100 Modern Poems*, which excerpted her *Four Saints in Three Acts*. At this time too, as The Living Theatre was just organizing,

among the first works the group presented were Stein's *Ladies' Voices* and *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, which Judith Malina directed. Cambridge's Brattle Theatre Company, whose members in the early fifties included the poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, early admirers of Stein's writing who would later become prominent New York poets, was also producing her work. The first audiences for Stein were the poets, visual artists, and performers who would define the American avant-garde of the fifties and sixties, particularly what was to become the New York School, and who knew her writings from available books and alternative literary magazines. Stein's work, while it was ignored by commercial and establishment theaters, was performed almost exclusively in off-Broadway spaces and university theaters.

She became a more visible presence in the downtown arts scene in New York in the sixties. In 1963 the Judson Poets' Theatre staged *What Happened*, which featured Judson Dance Theatre members Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Aileen Passloff, and Arlene Rothlein, with Lawrence Kornfeld directing and the Reverend Al Carmines composing the music. As an unmistakable homage to Stein, her play was published a decade later in the comprehensive *Off Off Broadway Book*, an anthology of plays that featured the most influential writers of the sixties. In newspaper accounts of the Judson Dance Theatre some of the dancers' own work was compared to the circularity and repetition of Stein's writing. In the sixties and seventies the Judson Poets' Theatre was to stage several of the author's plays (*What Happened, In Circles, Listen to Me, A Manoir*, and *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, among them), setting a standard for Stein productions. Around the same time, the dancer and Judson mentor James Waring choreographed a piece based on her long work *Stanzas in Meditation*. Curiously, Stein's theatrical reputation rests largely on her work as opera or music theater, though she didn't like music and expressed an interest in seeing her work done without it.

In the context of the explosion of avant-garde performance in the decades after World War II, with the blurring of boundaries between the arts, the close-knit community of artists and audiences who supported experimental work, and the influence of European modernism, Stein's legacy found its way into many new directions taken by writers and performers. Some discovered her poetics of performance, others her poetry, still others the erotics of her texts. The aesthetics of the sixties had

natural affinities with her own work, especially the emphasis on process and repetition, the attachment to the idea of the ordinary, the fascination with objects, an insistence on presence, and experiments with new formal vocabularies in all the arts. These issues were appealing to the generation who created happenings, Fluxus, the Judson Dance Theatre, and the Judson Poets' Theatre. One of the members of Fluxus, Dick Higgins, who founded Something Else Press at this time, began to publish a number of Stein's out-of-print books, making them available to a new generation. Until the recent reprinting of several Stein titles, as a result of renewed interest in her work, his decades-old editions of some of the books have been the only ones around.

It has long been acknowledged that in this period of the new American arts the major source of performance ideas was John Cage, whose writing, composing, and collaboration with Merce Cunningham infused all the arts with a new energy, vocabulary, and provocation still evident today. But if John Cage has been the father of the American avant-garde, surely Gertrude Stein has been its mother. Together the two of them are the progenitors of the last half-century of American avant-garde work. Stein did for the theater what Cage did for music: completely rethink the art, its manner of composition, and audience reception. Both are marginal figures in the fields they represent in the sense that they are outside the canons of official culture. But if one looks back over the entire twentieth century, they remain the wellspring for American avant-garde artists, even if their original works are at times not as well known as the circulation of ideas around them.

Their affirmation of life, untouched by modern and at times fashionable alienation, is a joyous modernism that influenced the definition of an American performance aesthetic in profound, enduring ways, setting it apart from European practice in its formal and personal rather than political preoccupations. What Cage declared early on as his credo applies equally well to Stein: the world is excellent if we would only wake up to the life we are living. Both tried to live in looking and listening, erasing for themselves the borders between art and life, object and experience. They went about their work as if creation were a kind of song. When art means more as experience than production, everything exists as a world of possibilities, in continuous variation and multiplicity. Everything is usable. If Stein determined to let words be themselves, Cage let sounds be themselves: what counts is that each one is given

the freedom to be itself. Stein's melody of existence is Cage's harmony of nature: her landscape as play, his field of sound and imaginary landscape. Together these marvelous, exuberant naturalists have left us a twentieth-century field guide to the sights and sounds of our world.

From the perspective of ecology, Stein and Cage formulated strikingly like-minded biocentric worldviews in their treatment of all material for composition as natural phenomena. The sounds of birds interrupt the human voice, plant life shares the environment with human life. Their reaching out to the natural world, to nature as process, creates the feeling of the open air in their work, the importance given to space as a luxurious field of activity and wonder, a landscape of unlimited centers of focus. This spatial unfolding of composition distances itself from linearity as time flows into space: duration, not sequence, is what matters. Both Stein and Cage conceived ideas about art by observing nature, making art more like life rather than the other way around. For them life itself made a composition. In their generosity of spirit they were interested in everything that came their way, a quality of worldly engagement that led to a deep regard for inclusiveness and differentiation and a fondness for the "found" phrase, object, event. They gloried in the ordinary, Stein in the lives of words, Cage in the lives of sounds, and more lovingly, in their writings the everyday activities and comings and goings of friends—in short, the pleasures of company—are casually recorded as text. In particular, their longtime companions, Alice B. Toklas and Merce Cunningham, are embedded in words. Conversation is the key to their compositions.

If Stein eliminated story and made the play the thing, the essence of what happens, Cage refused to structure music, but let the sounds themselves happen. The play, the sound: it is just there. Stein understood that what is seen in a composition depends upon "the enjoyer," and Cage let "people" decide what to listen to and how. Along with Duchamp, they shared an absolute devotion to the idea that a work exists beyond its status as an object, that it is experienced in subjective space. Stein's continuous present is Cage's process, their obsession with time the center of their provocative essays, her "Composition as Explanation," his "Composition as Process."

What grounds their work, infusing it with the feeling of spiritual wholeness, is a reverence for the presence of mind in everyday life: experience honored as a constant rhythm of enlightenment. Remark-

ably, both artists were drawn to the concept of emptiness, Stein through the writing process and Cage through his study of Buddhism. There is much complexity in the simplicity of their thought but no mysticism, not in these down-to-earth artists: they were in search of the real. What "emptiness" allowed was a freeing of the mind from memory in order to let the immediacy of experience take over. Freedom from memory and habit and history were fundamental principles of the grand projects Stein and Cage realized in their ecstatic lives.

Stein's influence moved into a new phase in the theater with the emergence of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson as important artists in the 1970s. Richard Foreman's early work was written very much under the example of Stein as he began to incorporate in his plays autobiographical notes and personal experiences recorded at the time he was writing the plays and, like her, subverted memory and associative thinking in art. Perhaps the strongest linkage between Stein and Foreman, as America's foremost philosophical theater minds, is the significance they give to perception as the subject of art and to audience emotion in the theatrical experience and their subsequent attempt to break down into the smallest elements aspects of art and experience. Their philosophical tendencies have led both authors to the ultimate belief in writing as an expression of faith, in a deeply spiritual, secular sense. Foreman staged Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* in Paris and Berlin more than a decade ago.

The presence of Stein has always been apparent in the construction of Robert Wilson's texts, even in their typographical design, which allows words with space around them. His own interest in textuality seems closest to the poetry in her plays, especially the emphasis on sound rather than meaning, the disorientation of syntax, and the attraction to repetition, quotation, and fragment. He also puts historical figures in his pieces with the same freedom from chronological time Stein assumed for herself. But the more significant Stein legacy in Wilson's theater, and here the two share a visual arts sensibility, is his extension of her conception of a play as landscape. His sense of composition parallels Stein's: space as a field of revelation and surprise.

Like the Living Theatre, the Judson Poets' Theatre, and Richard Foreman, in Berlin a few years ago Robert Wilson also staged his own *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, which seems to hold continuing interest for avant-garde generations in its eccentric confrontation with the

themes of identity, enlightenment, and illusion. Over the years Wilson has reimagined opera and music theater, his *Dr. Faustus* offering a new model for staging Stein, vastly different from the Judson revue style and closer to an American opera experimental tradition based on imagery and movement. His production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* will premiere in Houston in 1996.

Other generations of artists after Foreman and Wilson continue to turn to Stein, particularly at the start of their careers. *Photograph* was an early James Lapine project, as an adaptation of Stein's *The Making of Americans* was for Anne Bogart. Perhaps the most enchanting homage to Stein is the biennial marathon reading (alternating with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) of her great work *The Making of Americans* at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York's Soho district on the occasion of the New Year. The twentieth annual reading was celebrated in 1994 with the Stein text, which takes approximately fifty hours to complete. The ambience of the gallery offers a warm, meditative space into which curious passersby wander and where aficionados of the event make their holiday appearance, everyone lounging on floor cushions along the bare walls or lying about the polished floor, listening, dreaming, while dozens of readers take their turn all day and all night, measuring out the long narrative in Stein's rolling, recalcitrant sentences.

Her friend the poet Mina Loy understood the way Stein could get inside a word. She had a very special appreciation of such astonishing literary gifts:

> Curie
> of the laboratory
> of vocabulary
> she crushed
> the tonnage
> of consciousness
> congealed to phrases
> to exact
> a radium of the word

Stein herself knew what she was doing, because she set her own achievement on the level of scientific discovery. "Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind" is the way she defined the times. Her orientation re-

flected the new world of physics in its development of composition as a field of innumerable centers, and like her avant-garde contemporaries, she was aware of the new thinking in non-Euclidean geometry and the fourth dimension. If artists create worlds before science can find proof of them, then surely, looking back over the century, it is now obvious that Stein's technique has affinities with what has come to be known as chaos theory. Many of its defining features describe her writing: the pattern of self-similarity, words acting as strange attractors, the importance of scale, deep structures of order within unpredictable systems. Stein is a master of what can be thought of as the "fractal text," which makes her theater an exacting guide to a dramaturgy of chaotics. From the start her world has been ruled by its own natural processes.

There is no sense of ever coming to an end in Stein. Reading her is like wandering the Grand Canyon, trying to search a way out only to become drawn back into it, continually absorbed by the pleasure of tracing the endless diverging lines impressed upon constantly transforming surfaces, and at every turn discovering winding, wider pathways leading to ever more mysterious corridors of experience. Her work has the grandeur of the inexhaustible, the self-sufficiency of nature, a resistance to being known given only to special things.

Much of what Stein wrote and thought was set down in notebooks during the long nights at the rue de Fleurus. Down the block from her home is the western gate of the Luxembourg Gardens, and through the entrance to the left a statue of Paul Verlaine, to the right a smaller version of the Statue of Liberty. France and America at either elbow. Pigeons are still on the grass. She followed this pathway for three decades, often with her little dog, Basket, wondering what made any one that one, why any word was that word. As Gertrude Stein walked the lush allées that diagram the splendid park into long pleached sentences, now and then in the verdure of solitude perhaps her own words came to mind, *I had really written thinking.*

(1995)

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