Spring 1996

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Recommended Citation
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"An Audience is an Audience": Gertrude Stein Addresses the Five Hundred

Robert M. Post

The controversy surrounding Gertrude Stein's capabilities as a thinker and writer in her own day persists to the present. For example, her nontraditional writing was declared by some to be nonsense (Sprigge xiii), while others bluntly suggested that the writing resembled that of persons in mental institutions ("Gertrude Stein Home After Thirty-One Years" 34). In 1934 Morris Fishbein, editor of The Journal of the American Medical Association, declared that Stein might be afflicted with palilalia, a result of encephalitis commonly known as "sleeping sickness" ("Diagnosis: The Doctor Makes an Analysis of Gertrude Stein" 24). On a more positive note an editorial in Nation proclaimed that "Miss Gertrude Stein is not actually loony" ("Editorial Paragraphs" 67). It is this latter opinion along with even more supportive ones that render Stein a subject worthy of continued study. Michael J. Hoffman reminds us that "there are many . . . who consider her a major author, the founder of a new literary style, the great apologist for Modernism" (15). Harold Bloom considered her "The greatest master of dissociative rhetoric in modern writing" ("Introduction" 1), while Bettina L. Knapp believes that "a truism today" is "That Stein played a significant role in shaping twentieth-century literature" (177). Elizabeth Sprigge informs us that Francis Rose grew to believe that Stein was "in her way as great a writer as Shakespeare" (165).

Insights into the thinking and feeling of such diverse writers as Charles Dickens, Vachel Lindsay, Edith Sitwell, and Dylan Thomas have been gained by discussing performances they gave of their own writings. If we are interested in the performances of Gertrude Stein, we must look to her lectures for information since Stein did not actually give readings or recitals as many authors do. Only one recording of her reading her own work exists, for example.1 This review of her speaking and reading, designed to emphasize her thinking and feeling, begins with citations of the few instances
known of her performing in private or in public. The major focus is on her lectures, in which she often recited or "chanted" from her writings. The most important series of lectures—in fact, one of the most significant events of her life—was the tour she made of the United States, framed by two different lectures at Oxford and Cambridge given ten years apart. 

One of the earliest references to performance occurs when Stein’s Aunt Rachel wrote just before Gertrude’s second birthday that “he [brother Leo] and the baby [Gertrude] can sing and repeat some nice little songs and verses” (Sprigge 5), although Richard Bridgman would later write that “Gertrude Stein had a poor memory for poetry” (12). Not much has been written about her performances until we learn that during her matriculation at Radcliffe Stein joined the Idler’s Club, a dramatic group devoted to presenting and discussing plays. James R. Mellow describes a photograph of a production in which “Gertrude, already impressive in size, was given a matronly role, set apart from the more slender couples, who evidently provided the love interest of the play” (28), and Elizabeth Sprigge reports that “friends still have memories of a curtain rising to disclose the robust form of Gertie spinning in a swivel chair” (28). Critics and biographers often seem unduly preoccupied with Stein’s appearance.

While others of her contemporaries, such as Apollinaire, declaimed their poetry aloud in cafés, “Gertrude read her highly syncopated word portraits and poems aloud to friends in her studio” (Mellow 97). During World War I at Palma de Mallorca Gertrude read all of Queen Victoria’s letters to her companion, Alice B. Toklas (Stein 1990, 164). We also have evidence that Stein read aloud portions of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas to Picasso (Mellow 356). Sprigge reports that for a time Gertrude and Alice spent Friday afternoons reading Shakespeare with a group of friends (248). Samuel M. Steward tells about Stein reading her children’s book, The World is Round, to him:

... the intonations of that great contralto voice, the resonance and golden timbre of it and her inflections stay in my mind. Her deep warm tones tolled and echoed through the room, sometimes breathlessly tumbling sometimes slow and measured, full of assurance and life. (65)
When she was in America, Pathé-News made a newsreel of Gertrude reading “the ‘Pigeons on the grass alas’ segment of Four Saints” (Mellow 407).

The reason there are so few instances of Gertrude Stein performing in public can be attributed to her feelings of discomfort at being alone on a platform before a group of people. Allegra Stewart explained that Gertrude was uncomfortable before audiences because she “sought to isolate herself in every way possible in order that communication should not interfere with communion” (71). Edith Sitwell was the first to urge Stein to accept when she was proffered an invitation to speak from the president of the literary society of Cambridge University in 1925. Gertrude resisted for awhile but eventually relented and was the next year invited by Harold Acton to lecture at Oxford. She relates in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas how one “cold dark afternoon she went out to sit with her ford car” while it was being repaired and after several hours “when she came back chilled, with the ford repaired, she had written the whole of Composition as Explanation,” her Cambridge-Oxford lecture (Stein 1990, 233). She had decided to assuage her fear of performing in public by writing out the lecture word for word and then reading it aloud (Knapp 59). Natalie Clifford Barney wanted Gertrude to rehearse the lecture at her salon, but Stein preferred to seek advice from those she considered experts in speaking (Wickes 168). A “very aged and very charming french professor of history” advised her to “Talk as quickly as you can and never look up,” while a Boston friend equally emphatically urged her to “talk as slowly as possible and never look down” (Stein 1990, 233). Stein appears to have steered a middle course.

Gertrude and Alice arrived in England from Paris with the former still feeling uneasy about the enterprise. The Sitwell trio—Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell—was scheduled for a reading, and, perhaps to help prepare Gertrude for her own lecture, invited her to share the platform with them. Osbert Sitwell was especially comforting to Gertrude: “He so thoroughly understood every possible way in which one could be nervous that as he sat beside her in the hotel telling her all the kinds of ways that he and she could suffer from stage fright she was quite soothed” (Stein 1990, 234).

The lecture at Trinity College, Cambridge, at 8:30 p.m. Friday, June 4, 1926, was preceded by tea, and Stein later had dinner with
the president of the literary society and a few of his friends. She admitted that she was soon at ease in the lecture hall: "... the lecture went off very well, the men afterwards asked a great many questions and were very enthusiastic. The women said nothing. Gertrude Stein wondered whether they were supposed not to or just did not" (Stein 1990, 234).

The lecture when delivered again at Christ Church, Oxford University, June 7 was even more of a success. Stein was accompanied by the three Sitwells and Toklas. Acton described Gertrude as "a squat Aztec figure in obsidian, growing more monumental as soon as she sat down," and "With her tall bodyguards of Sitwells and the gipsy acolyte [Alice] she made a memorable entry" (161). Following the lecture to the standing-room-only audience, she performed some of her word portraits, including the one of Edith Sitwell. Acton said that while Gertrude was reading about Sitwell, Edith tried "not to look as embarrassed as she felt. Sachie looked as if he were swallowing a plum and Osbert shifted on his insufficient chair with a vague nervousness in his eyes" (162).

One of the more controversial ideas offered in the lecture was that everything is the same and everything is different. When one of two men who kept asking questions inquired as to how that could be so, Gertrude answered, "Consider ... the two of you, you jump up one after the other, that is the same thing and surely you admit that the two of you are always different. Touché, he said and the meeting was over" (Stein 1990, 235). Acton concluded that "Gertrude left everybody in an excellent humour" and that "Those who had come to scoff were disarmed and charmed" (163). Stein was pleased that "One of the men [Acton identifies him as Maurice Bowra, 163] was so moved that he confided to me ... that the lecture had been his greatest experience since he had read Kant's Critique of Pure Reason" (Stein 1990, 235). In a letter to Carl Van Vechten Gertrude quoted one Oxford don as saying that "what he liked was that it was not an explanation [sic] but a creation" (Burns 134), and in another letter she summarized her experience in England as "a nice adventure one of the very nicest I ever had, real sympathy understanding and enthusiasm and so many admiring young men" (Burns 129-30). The Cambridge-Oxford lectures comprise the volume, *How Writing Is Written*.

The success of the lectures in England no doubt helped Stein finally decide, at the urging of William Rogers, to undertake the
American tour. As an American, Stein was fond of most things American and was understandably excited about coming "home" after living abroad for thirty-one years. On October 24, 1934, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas arrived in New York City on the S.S. Champlain. They had enjoyed their accommodations on board ship as "Being a celebrity we paid less than the full price of a small room and we had a very luxurious one" (Stein 1971, 167). John Malcolm Brinnin said that her fame was of "such proportions that her eminence on the American scene was for a time shared only by gangsters, baseball players and movie stars" (307-8). She herself wrote, "In America everybody is but some are more than others. I was more than others" (Stein 1971, 168). Gertrude and Alice were greeted with much publicity. Janet Hobhouse tells us that Stein’s "picture was on the front page of every New York newspaper" (178), which was not quite true, while Mellow says that "Every reporter commented on the unusual attire of the two women" (380), which did seem to be true. Gertrude was recognized wherever she went: "everybody everywhere said how do you do" (Stein 1971, 78).

In anticipation of her first New York lecture Gertrude became obsessed with the idea that she was going to lose her voice. She contacted a doctor she had met on the crossing, and he convinced her there was no problem. Her final meal before the lecture consisted of "oysters, corn bread, and honeydew melon," and since this menu seemed to agree with her, she repeated it "wherever possible, at every lecture date" (Mellow 382). She found introductions superfluous:

Besides it was silly everybody knew who I was if not why did they come and why should I sit and get nervous while somebody else was talking. So it was decided from then on that there would be no introduction nobody on the platform a table for me to lean on and five hundred to listen. (Stein 1971, 177)

As part of the requisites for her lecturing, Stein stubbornly refused to speak before more than five hundred. Bridgman explained this was her effort "to reduce the dehumanizing effect of masses of people" (275).

At 9 p.m. on November 1, 1934, Gertrude Stein entered the ballroom of New York's Colony Club, took her place on the
platform, and was prepared to deliver her first lecture in America, "Painting." The audience for this first American lecture was "large and sophisticated, members of the new Museum of Modern Art, which had been swamped with requests for tickets" (Mellow 383). Mellow suggests that "there were considerably more than 500 people in the audience that evening, but Gertrude, who had been told that the seating capacity was 390, was unaware" (383-84). Stein conquered her stage fright during this first lecture: "After all once you know an audience is an audience why should it make any difference" (Stein 1971, 178). Mellow gives the following description of her on this occasion:

She was wearing a voluminous brown silk dress, its only adornment a large Victorian diamond pin that glittered in the bright lights. In this solemn attire, her hair cropped, her face still tanned from the summer, she stood out in marked contrast to the fashionably gowned women in the audience. (384)

T.S. Matthews in The New Republic describes his impressions of Stein as follows:

The first glimpse you get of her, as she trudges resolutely up on the lecture platform, is reassuring. This solid elderly woman, dressed in no-nonsense rough-spun clothes, seems at once smaller and more human than her monumental photographs or J. Davidson's squat image of her. As she looks out over the audience and thanks us, with a quick low hoot of laughter, for 'controlling yourselves to 500' we laugh too, in appreciative relief, and settle back in our seats to give her the once-over. This Gertrude Stein woman may not be so crazy after all. Some of our wariness eases off. She has made a good beginning, there's no denying that. (100)

Matthews continues to remark that her speech has not been affected by living abroad: "... she talks in as flatly sensible an American tone as any Middle Western aunt" (100). Mellow, in contradiction, wrote that she read the lecture "evenly and slowly, in her cultured, eastern girls' school voice" (384). Stein's speaking voice is variously described as "low-pitched, harshly pleasant" by Matthews (100); "magnificent... like heavy velvet" by her
sister-in-law Nina Auzias Stein (Sprigge 83); “deep alto” by Steward (9); characterized by “lightness and suavity,” according to Mellow (14); and “unlike anyone else’s voice—deep, full, velvety, like a great contralto’s, like two voices” by Toklas (Mellow 108). Others, including Ernest Hemingway, declared that her voice was “the most remarkable thing about her—powerful and low and lovely and smooth and comforting” (Ratcliffe 29).

According to Matthews, Stein did not gesture as she spoke except for “taking her pince-nez off and putting them on” (100). He did not find her an especially effective lecturer: “…she drops her voice at the end of every sentence, and talks more and more to one side of the room, so that a good third of us have to cup our ears and guess at the words we miss” (100). Matthews applauds her reading aloud selections from her books, saying that the “tonelessness that helps to lend an idiotic quality to her writing is emphatically absent from her reading” (100). He continues to state that “She reads, indeed, with an exaggerated emphasis, putting back all the italics and commas and dashes she has carefully not written. The passages she reads make startlingly good sense” (100). Stephen Ratcliffe contrasts reading Stein to himself with Stein reading Stein:

Hearing Stein read out loud, as opposed to reading her on the page, we are compelled to follow and be taken along, keep going. And when a passage…doesn’t ‘make sense’ so be it, we can’t stop so we have somehow to accept it, just listen. (30)

Matthews’ conclusion at observing Stein lecture is that she is a “fundamentally serious” writer being welcomed home: “Her own country, after thirty years of neglect, is delighting to honor her” (100). According to the New York Times, reporting on the first American lecture, “most of those present had been entertained, for the applause at Miss Stein’s closing remarks…was prolonged” (“Miss Stein Speaks to Bewildered 500” 25).

B.L. Reid, who is generally highly critical, if not actually cruel, when speaking of Stein, is his most positive about the lectures: “In them she tries her best to be serious and philosophical and plainly intelligible, and, with some reservations, she succeeds” (98). In the lecture on “Painting,” an appropriate subject for this art collector and friend of painters, Stein reveals that she eschewed that which was too real in paintings. She was, she said, disturbed by paintings
that were "too real and yet . . . not real enough to be real and not unreal enough to be unreal" (Stein 1957, 73). She liked for paintings to "move," to live outside their frames. As part of this first lecture she performed some of her word portraits from *Portraits and Prayers*, including those of Juan Gris, Matisse, and Picasso.

In the lecture on "The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*" she tells how she developed that book as well as *A Long Gay Book*. The development started with her constant talking, as a way of listening, in her childhood, continued through college with the influence of William James and psychology, and proceeded to the boredom of medical school. She wrote *The Making of Americans* because she was interested in the different types of persons, what she called "the bottom nature in people" (Stein 1957, 138). In discussing the writing of the book, she comments on the simplicity of English grammar, a simplicity hardly proved by her own sentences. This lecture is illustrated with generous excerpts from both *The Making of Americans* and *A Long Gay Book*.

In "What Is English Literature" Stein, proclaiming to have read and reread all of English literature, professes that "the pleasure of a literature is having it all inside you" (Stein 1957, 27). She emphasizes the influence on early English writers of the daily life of their isolated island life. As life became less insular, writers moved from the aesthetics of choosing individual words to communicating in sentences and phrases and, in the twentieth century, in paragraphs. She also contemplates whether the writer serves Mammon or God, concluding that one whose writing is indirect, characterized by separation, and is imitative of preceding writing serves Mammon, while one serves God when the writing is direct, characterized by completion, and is unique or original.

In her lecture on "Plays" Stein makes much of what she considers the fact that the emotion of the audience always occurs before or after the emotion of the action of the play and never simultaneously with it. She spends considerable time in the first part of the lecture contrasting a real happening, reading a scene, and seeing a play. Although she saw actors of the calibre of Edwin Booth and Sarah Bernhardt while she was growing up in California, she had largely abandoned attending the theatre by the time she started creating her own plays. She illustrated her discussion of her composition of plays by performing from her dramas, including "Say It with Flowers," "Louis XI and Madam Giraud," and "Madame Recamier."
In “Portraits and Repetition” she tells us that in her word portraits she tried to capture “the intensity of anybody’s existence” (Stein 1957, 182), or the movement inside them. She answers the critics who castigate her Steinesque repetition by saying there is no repetition, only insistence. Nothing is ever repeated in exactly the same way, but emphasis shifts when a statement is made again. She compares her writing of slight changes from phrase to phrase or sentence to sentence with film in which each frame differs slightly from those on either side of it. No two frames are identical; in other words, there is no repetition. Ratcliffe, referring to Stein’s recording of her writings, comments that while she seems to be “saying the same thing over and over again . . . At the same time, we get the sense that what she says isn’t ever quite exactly repeated” (29). She declares that there is no plot, only portraits, in the three great novels of her generation—Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, Joyce’s Ulysses, and her own The Making of Americans. She illustrated this lecture by reading verbal portraits from Portraits and Prayers and one from Tender Buttons.

In the last of the American lectures, “Poetry and Grammar,” which Bridgman says is the most popular (254), Stein confesses that a singularly exciting thing for her was diagraming sentences. She distinguishes between prose and poetry by saying that prose consists of sentences, which she finds unemotional, and paragraphs, which she considers emotional, and contains few nouns. The vocabulary of poetry, on the other hand, consists essentially of nouns. Poetry is thus the naming of names: “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.” However, she declares that nouns along with adjectives are the most uninteresting parts of speech, and she judges most punctuation marks uninteresting. She advocates doing pretty much as one pleases with capital letters, predicting that they will eventually be phased out. As part of this lecture she read “A Very Valentine” and “Bundles for Them” from Portraits and Prayers.

These six lectures were presented in almost every part of the country. James Laughlin reported that Stein “crisscrossed the country raising her special kind of dust” (532). Leaving New York, Stein lectured in New England, in the South, in the Middle West, and parts of the Far West, including California. The states she did not visit include Iowa because of snow and Montana, Oregon, and Washington because plans were never completed. Van Vechten referred to Stein and Toklas’s “Marcopoloesque journey,” saying that “No one except Sarah Bernhardt and William Jennings Bryan
has ever seen so much of our country” (Burns 365). Her audiences included those at approximately thirty universities for which she received $100 each ($250 for other organizations). She liked college audiences because “they inevitably are more flattering” (Stein 1971, 181). A favorite university was the University of Wisconsin. Her favorite men’s college was Wesleyan, while Mount Holyoke was her favorite women’s college (Stein 1971, 239).

In a letter to Van Vechten Gertrude shares her pleasant reaction to Amherst:

Amherst was awfully nice, the next morning the students went around collecting faculty opinions and the football coach said yes I’d like to have Gertrude for the tackles but I don’t know whether she would be good to call the signals and then reflectively but I guess Alice B. would do that, and another one said, I was dead against her and I just went to see what she looked like and then she took the door of my mind right off its hinges and now it is wide open. (Burns 374)

The interesting or unusual experiences during the tour included her giving a special lecture on the creative process at the Chaote School in Wallingford, Connecticut, where she found that the twelve- to sixteen-year-old boys “listened to everything I had to say” (Stein 1971, 241). At the Hockaday School for Girls, a junior college in Dallas, she was delighted to find that the students “did understand what I had written” (Mellow 406).

Of the cities visited, Gertrude liked Chicago best. During her initial visit to the University of Chicago and a seminar led by President Robert Maynard Hutchins and Vice-President Mortimer Adler, Stein questioned the way they were proceeding, so they asked her to teach the class herself if she thought she could do a better job. She accepted the challenge. She prepared four essentially new lectures (later published as Narration) “about organization and inside and outside” (Stein 1971, 263), written in the apartment of Thornton Wilder, who had handpicked the students she was to teach. Her experiment in teaching was apparently a success: “. . . I talked a great deal and they talked some and it really was not any different than if I had been here at home” (Stein 1971, 261). She did confess at the time that it was work: “Being a really truly college professor is hard work, particularly when you have never been one before . . . and
anyway although I really do not like work I am enjoying it a lot and finding it very interesting” (Burns 406-7).

Gertrude and Alice were invited to the White House for tea on December 30, 1934, where they were entertained by Eleanor Roosevelt, the President being occupied with his annual address to Congress. There were few unsettling experiences during the American tour, but Mellow reports at least one. Toklas invited a young man who greatly admired Stein to a party given in their honor by Bennett Cerf where, after several cocktails, the young man “knelt down on the floor and kissed the hem of Gertrude’s gown, much to her embarrassment” (389).

Her American experience concluded, Gertrude, seeing her native country for the last time, boarded the S.S. Champlain on May 4, 1935, to return to France. She did not lecture much after this. Early in 1936 she went again to Cambridge and Oxford where she delivered a lecture on masterpieces and a second, “An American in France,” to the French Club at Oxford. Sprigge quotes her reaction: “I came over to lecture in Oxford and Cambridge and it has gone off very well, it is very sweet the way the American boys in these colleges look upon me as the American flag” (214). After the end of World War II Eric Sevareid arranged for Stein to broadcast to America from Voiron (Mellow 456), and Joseph Barry encouraged her to lecture at American Army bases, which she did in Germany, Austria, and Belgium (Hobhouse 229).

The debate concerning Gertrude Stein’s literary reputation is no doubt part of what led Bridgman to the conclusion that “her literary identity remains ambiguous” (xiii). There is little doubt, however, that part of her heritage is the influence she had on other writers, including Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Thornton Wilder. Yet she herself had to admit that her American public was more interested in her than in her work (1971, 50). William Gass synthesized many of the diverse views of the woman when he labeled her “an eccentric, dilettante, and gossip, madwoman, patron, genius, tutor, fraud, and queer—the Mother Goose of Montparnasse” (Steiner ix).
NOTES

1 Edward Burns gives the following history of the lone Stein recording:

Three 12-inch (78 rpm) records were recorded by Stein for Columbia University in 1935. On the records Stein read excerpts from her writings: on record one, "Matisse" and "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso"; on record two, "Madame Recamier" and "A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson"; on record three, excerpts from The Making of Americans. These recordings were reissued in 1951 by Dorian Records on a 12-inch (33 1/3 rpm) record [#DR-331-1 and 2]; the [sic] were again reissued under the Caedmon label in 1956 [#TC-1050]. (412)

2 There were, of course, other instances of Stein speaking in public. Some, no doubt, went unrecorded, but others were reported. One such incident was her spur-of-the-moment fielding of questions at the American Women's Club in Paris December 8, 1933. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas attended that night after being invited by Bernard Fay, the French historian and critic who was to speak but ended up stranded in Copenhagen. When Gertrude was asked to substitute, she agreed but adamantly insisted she would only answer questions. The subject was art, and, according to Clara More de Morinni, Stein "had very convincing comments on the matter" for an audience that "was delighted to find that she had an easy, outgoing platform manner, and could and did speak direct and lucid English" (18). "The evening," de Morinni testifies, "was a huge success" (19).

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