**Gertrude Stein,**

**Movement and Media**

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of the degree of M.Phil**

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**Declaration of Authorship**

I Elena Serrajotto hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the ways in which the rise of new forms of technological and artistic expression like photography and cinema influenced Gertrude Stein’s philosophy and work, allowing her to solve the dilemma of how to write the relation between movement, the essence of the world, and the viewer’s perception of it, without resorting to *mimesis*. Central to that apparatus and to Stein’s work are two ideas developed in Stein’s essays: firstly the notion of the repetitionof an image, of an action, of a sound; and secondly the illusion that what the spectator/reader, is enjoying is really taking place *hic et nunc*,somewhere in a sort of fourth dimension free of temporal boundaries.

The dissertation argues that the modern media are the fundamental means through which Stein’s methodology develops. Through an analysis of three central generically-specific examples (*Tender Buttons*; the portraits; and the plays), the dissertation attempts to show how relevant chronophotography and cinema rather than Cubism were to her understanding of movement. I suggest that not only had new media affected Stein, the reverse was also true: by challenging traditional cognitive and narrative methods and by making use of the latest technological inventions available in order to identify, capture and portray the essence of existence, Stein stretched and surpassed the artistic languages available to her to such an extent that some of her later plays had to wait until new technologies were invented, in order to be realized. I conclude by suggesting that it was not until the advent of digital puppetry and the internet with its a-spacial, atemporal and self-referential status that Stein’s continuous present could finally find an expression.

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**Introduction**

Gertrude Stein was in her early teens when her first reported experience with a painting took place. In the early spring of 1885 she visited the San Francisco Panorama Building where Joseph Bertrand, the French academic landscape painter and Lucien Sargent, the French figure painter had installed their cyclorama representing the battle of Waterloo. By that time the panorama had already become a powerful mass entertainment vehicle, a format for the representation of both breathtaking landscapes such as Niagara falls or for the reconstruction of epic battles of the Civil War, Trafalgar and the like. She later remembered that

It was an oil painting a continuous oil painting … and I who lived continuously out of doors and felt air and sunshine and things to see felt that this was all different and very exciting. I remember standing on the little platform in the center and almost consciously knowing that there was no air. There was no feeling of air, it just was an oil painting and it had a life of its own and it was a scene as an oil painting sees it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here she was struck for the first time by an understanding of space. As she put it in *Paris, France*:

It was then I first realised the difference between a painting and out of doors. I realised that a painting is always a flat surface and out of doors never is, and that out of doors is made up of air and a painting has no air, the air is replaced by a flat surface, and anything in a painting that imitates air is illustration and not art. I seem to have felt all that very intensely standing on the platform and being all surrounded by an oil painting.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We might see this as the beginning of Stein’s lifelong passion for the visual arts, a deep interest whose origins are worth consideration, for it eventually made of her one of the most influential figures of the new century, a minister of propaganda for modern art, as James R. Mellow described her; or ‘a spokesperson for a transatlantic cubist aesthetic’, as Gregory Galligan put it, sensing and promoting the revolutionary potential of such little-known artists as Picasso, and marking a turning point in the history of art.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Stein wrote in her lecture ‘Plays’ that ‘the business of art is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This statement is fundamental to an understanding of Stein’s artistic ethos. An artist should not shy away from the latest technological, cultural or scientific findings, but on the contrary embrace them as they are the product of the present. Even from such an early age, if we are to believe her retrospective narration, Stein approached the cyclorama and far from being overwhelmed by it, used it as a stepping stone toward a heightened understanding of the world, of the present. Standing in the middle of that platform seems to have made Stein intensely aware of the difference between reality and representation; she was not absorbed by what she saw. Quite the opposite: she was struck by the realization that ‘air’ was missing from the painted scene and that it had ‘a life of its own’. There was an imitation of air, which made of the panorama an illustration, and not art. Instead of becoming seamlessly part of Stein’s existence, the panorama brought Stein’s ‘life flow’ to a sudden unpleasant halt during which she became immediately self-aware and as a consequence, conscious of the world she inhabited. Recognizing the epiphanic effect such an experience had on her, Stein (I will argue) strived to incorporate it into her writing, so that her public would achieve a heightened and more conscious perception of themselves and consequently grasp and perceive what was to become Stein’s holy grail: the essence of life, the essence of a human being.

When I began researching this dissertation, my aim was to investigate how the rise of new forms of technological and artistic expression like photography and cinema influenced Gertrude Stein’s philosophy and work, allowing her to solve the dilemma of how to capture on paper the relation between movement, the essence of the world, and the viewer’s perception of it without resorting to imitation. I knew that central to that apparatus and to Stein’s work were two ideas: the notion of repetitionof an image, of an action, of a sound; and the illusion that what the spectator/reader is enjoying is really taking place *hic et nunc*,somewhere in a sort of fourth dimension free of temporal boundaries. As Julian Murphet and others have suggested, the modern media are the fundamental means through which Stein’s methodology develops.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But as I read and re-read Stein’s corpus, it became more and more apparent to me that not only had the media affected Stein, the reverse was also true: by challenging the traditional cognitive and narrative methods and by making use of the latest technological inventions available in order to identify, capture and portray the essence of existence, Stein stretched and surpassed the artistic languages available to her to such an extent that some of her later plays had to wait until new technologies such as digital puppetry were invented in order to be staged with any fidelity to her intentions.

The first work analysed in chapter 1 will be *Tender Buttons*, the most innovative and enigmatic of Stein’s texts. The critical tendency to associate Stein’s style with Cubism is particularly evident in this case, and my purpose will be to show that because Stein’s aim in this work was to use objects as pretexts aiming to trigger the visual perceptive process in her mind, with the final purpose of analyzing it in detail, it would be more appropriate to compare *Tender Buttons* to Etienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography. With the aid of a single camera and a rotating disk with small slots cut into it at regular intervals which was spun in front of the open camera lens, Marey was able to analyse the successive spatial positions of the subject photographed. A moving subject would be photographed within the same frame in a different position each time the slot on the disk opened thus showing human movement in time and space. There was no sense of a ‘before’ or an ‘after’ at all. By decreasing progressively the intervals between the successive positions of the subject Marey’s chronophotographs showed a series figures overlapping, creating a sense of continuum never before experimented in the history of visual perception. Contemporary viewers would have been disconcerted as the traditional Western pictorial delineation of time and space would make them hard to read.

I maintain that the observer of Marey’s chronophotographs and the reader faced with Gertrude Stein’s continuous present must have been gripped by the same sense of dismay. Just as Marey in his chronophotographs strives to break down and capture movements until then never perceived by the human eye, in *Tender Buttons* Stein wants to portray the non-depictable aspects of the objects she scrutinizes, aspects implying either a sense of movement like a glittering surface or the smell that a color recalls to the mind or a feeling an object can evoke. Movement is crucial even in this apparently ‘still’ production, as I try to prove with the aid of a chart listing *Tender Button’s* basic lexical components relative to four semantic fields: the realms of visual perception, sounds, feelings and kinetic activity. I would suggest that such a schematic is a useful tool for analysing the distribution of language in Stein’s work.

In the second chapter I will deal with the portraits in which, Stein explained in1935, she tried to ‘make a cinema’ with each sentence just infinitesimally different from the one before, achieving in the later examples a ‘condensation’ of the ‘movement of a human being’.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is important to note the technology of the cinema as related to Stein’s sense of time; but it is of course William James’s psychology that provides her conceptual underpinnings. Her teacher and friend wrote in *The Principle of Psychology* (1890) about the perception of space and the optical comprehension of a panoramic subject. He suggested that any panorama or landscape can never be perceived as a whole but rather in sections and subsequently reconstructed in consciousness.[[7]](#footnote-7) I would suggest that this understanding of perceptual discontinuity is echoed in Stein’s problem in trying to understand how is it possible that although knowledge of a person is gained with time, gradually, in sections, it is possible once that knowledge has been achieved to recall their essence instantly at will, as a whole.

Finally in the third chapter the plays will be considered. Aligning Stein’s comedies with the technological devices typical of the first movies, I hope to demonstrate how spectators’ illusion of witnessing actions taking place for the first time in front of their eyes represents a fundamental issue both in Steinian comedy and in early film. Hypothesizing that Stein had set out to write plays in order to capture and expose the essence of a human being, I ask whether there is throughout her plays a common impulse which underlies the works and helps us understand their progress. In my view that impulse is a focus – again - on the meanings of *movement*.

With the plays Stein could finally incorporate the flux of life into her art, not simply as a hint (as in *Tender Buttons)*, or as an echo in her words that would create an image in her readers’ minds (as in the portraits). Movement – whether the actions of a mind, body, or a motor car; the question of spatial positioning and its perception; or a more abstract sense of difference along something like the number line – was the idea implicit in every play, from composition to performance. It was the means through which she was going to bring works to life (and life to them); it was also the visible correlative of what she aimed at recreating on stage: that moment of mutual recognition between two human beings; the moment in which it is possible to have a glimpse of the other’s inner reality, the affectual movement of ‘being moved’.

In my dissertation I will try to show how whenever Stein asserts that she is trying to capture the ‘essence’ of a human being, the term ‘essence’ can be substituted for the term ‘rhythm’ – the latter term which has, of course, considerable resonance in the modernist period, with its origins in vitalist conceptions of the body and its relation to technology.[[8]](#footnote-8) The two, ‘essence’ and ‘rhythm’ are one and the same thing in relation to Stein: the ungraspable quid which tantalised Stein from beginning to end of her career; in her own

words ‘what made each one that one’. Dana Cairns Watson’s observation that *essence* is the French for ‘fuel’, the origins of independent movement in the era of the combustion engine, and thus a model for bodily action in general, seems to support my hunch that movement was indeed the core motivation underlying the analysis of human action in the plays. And when I encountered Agamben’s book *The Man Without Content* I was elated to find in it the grounds allowing me to link the concept of ‘rhythm’ intended as the principle of presence that makes everything existing (i.e. the Steinian quid) with its inherent signifying element pointing at a sense of flow, that is movement, as it has been considered in the tradition which descends to us from the pre-Socratics, as the foundation of human experience.

**Chapter 1**Movement and Media

The aim of this chapter will be to investigate how the rise of new forms of technological and artistic expression like photography and film influenced Gertrude Stein’s philosophy and work, allowing her to solve the dilemma of how to capture on paper the relation between movement, the essence of the world, and its viewer’s perception of it without resorting to imitation. Central to that apparatus and to Stein’s work is two elements: the notion of repetitionof an image, of an action, of a sound; and the illusion that what the spectator/reader, is enjoying is really taking place *hic et nunc*,somewhere in a kind of fourth dimension free of temporal boundaries. It is therefore my belief that the modern media are the fundamental means through which Stein’s methodology is negotiated.

The first of the works analysed will be *Tender Buttons*, the most innovative and enigmatic of Stein’s works. The critical tendency to associate Stein’s style with Cubism is particularly evident in this case, and my purpose will be to show that it would be more appropriate to compare *Tender Buttons* to Etienne-Jules Marey ‘s chronophotography. I will then study the portraits in which, as Stein explained in 1935, she tried to ‘make a cinema’ with each sentence just infinitesimally different from the one before and achieving in the latest ones through a ‘condensation’ of the writing the ‘movement of a human being’. Finally the plays will be considered. Aligning Stein’s comedies with the technological devices typical of the first movies, I hope to demonstrate how the spectators’ illusion of witnessing actions taking place for the first time in front of their eyes represents a fundamental issue both in Steinian comedy and in early film. Starting from her first play *What Happened*, reflecting upon the relation between her new style and photographs, and concluding with her 1929 scenario *Film* (subtitled *Deux Soeurs Qui Ne Sont Pas Soeurs*) in which the protagonist, a photograph of two white poodles, is a quite literally a moving picture, as it passes from hand to hand, I will analyse the way Stein’s attitude toward the cinematic experiment developed.

The first section of this chapter will concentrate on Stein’s formulation of the concept of insistence as opposed to repetition. By listening to her aunts talking, Stein started reflecting on the structure of the process of telling stories and on the matter of human nature. In the Preface of *Irresistible Dictation, Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*, Steven Meyer maintains that the textual context of Stein’s work is not only literary but also philosophical, psychological and neurophysiological.[[9]](#footnote-9) The second section will in this spirit deal with Stein as a student at the Harvard Annex, analysing how her early exposure to the new science of physiological psychology and William James’s teaching turned out to be fundamental for her compositional practice. In the course of this chapter I will also concentrate on two issues that played a crucial role in defining Stein’s artistic approach: a deep interest in the human being, and her first experience in the study of movement.

I will also consider the developments in Stein’s philosophy during the lapse of time necessary to the composition of *The Making of Americans*, a crucial period in Stein’s career, for in was then that the ideas were gathered that would lead to *Tender Buttons.* The fourth section will focus on Stein’s attitude towards early twentieth century technological innovations, with particular attention to developments in photography. I will analyse the intentions and achievements of two pioneers of the new photographic techniques, Etienne Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Pointing out the similarities between their work and Stein’s, I hope to prove that the Cubist interpretation of her writing is not the only possible one. Finally, in the last section I will concentrate directly on *Tender Buttons.* At first I will focus on the external structure of the book, and then on the poems themselves, trying to show that Stein looked at the objects she was about to portray with an attitude that has more in common with a photographer than with a painter.

**Completely talking and listening: Stein’s beginning of writing**

In 1892, following her father’ s death (her mother had died three years earlier), Gertrude, aged seventeen and Bertha, her elder sister, started living with their mother’s sister Fanny Bacharach in Baltimore. Their brother Leo, then nineteen, was about to enter Harvard. This experience of relocation turned out to be seminal for the young Stein. In California she had led a solitary life, and the new situation offered her the chance to widen the circle of her acquaintances. Also, as she later explained, the presence of her aunts gave her the chance to realize for the first time the difference between the notions of ‘repetition’ and ‘insistence’, an intuition that lead her eventually to her *portraits*.

When I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence when I first began to be really conscious of it was when at about seventeen years of age, I left the more or less internal and solitary and concentrated life I led in California and came to Baltimore and lived with a lot of my relations and principally with a whole group of very lively little aunts who had to know anything [[10]](#footnote-10)

Stein identifies in the aunts’ curiosity, or desire to *know*, the detonator for a chain reaction whose understanding will dramatically influence her perception of the cognitive process:

If they had to know anything and anybody does they naturally had to say and hear it often, anybody does, and as there were ten and eleven of them they did have to say and hear said whatever was said and any one not hearing what it was they said had to come in to hear what had been said. That inevitably made everything said often.

I began then to consciously listen to what anybody was saying and what they did say while there were saying what they were saying. This was not yet the beginning of writing but it was the beginning of knowing what there was that made there be no repetition.

No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition. This is what William James calls the Will to Live. If not nobody would live.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The reference to William James, whose philosophy later brought to maturity her precocious understanding of the essence of what ‘being alive’ meant, cannot be left unnoticed; but what it is important to stress here is the affirmation that repetition as such does not exists; even in the case of the same fact being returned to several times, repetition will not take place ‘while anybody is alive’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Because life never repeats itself, it is impossible that in telling the same story there will not be a different pulse to the telling.

Stein also observed that the story-telling process was not linear. As always happens when the conversation is carried on by a consistent number of speakers, there would be interruptions, requests for further explanation; somebody may have failed to catch the last words and ask for them to be repeated; some would join the group later and would be provided with a fast and fragmented summary of the facts, and she on her turn would provide them with new and interesting inputs accrediting or belying the story. Each, Stein noted, was talking and listening at the same time. Each was simultaneously giving and receiving bits of information, investing them (insisting on them she would say) with more or less importance, according to their personal scales of values, so that when reporting the story, or part of it, to a newcomer, the story told will necessarily be a reflection of the speaker’s emotional spectrum and consequently different from all the previous versions of it: ‘No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition’. And as there was no repetition, only insistence, slowly but steadily *what* the aunts *perceived* would eventually substitute for *what really happened*.

In the course of *Portraits and Repetition* Stein analyses another aspect of the process of ‘telling stories’, ‘listening’:

When all these eleven little aunts were listening as they were talking gradually some one of them was no longer listening. When this happened it might be that the time had come that any one or one of them was beginning repeating, that is was ceasing to be insisting or else perhaps it might be that the attention of one of some one of them had been worn out by adding something. What is the difference. Nothing makes any difference as long as some one is listening while they are talking. That is what I gradually began to know. Nothing makes any difference as long as some one is listening while they are talking.

If the same person does the talking and the listening why so much the better there is just by so much the greater concentration. One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius. And it is necessary if you are to be really and truly alive it is necessary to be at once talking and listening, doing both things, not if as they were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing.[[13]](#footnote-13)

‘To be at once talking and listening’ was what meant to be ‘really and truly alive’ and what constituted the essence of genius. In other words, genius is expressed by the ability to perceive the present moment and to interact in its immediacy, an ability that Stein was aware of possessing together with Picasso and Whitehead. Echoing Toklas’s description of Whitehead in *What is Remembered*, Stein characterized genius in terms of *simplicity* in her monograph on Picasso. It was her conviction that the Surrealists:

still see things as every one sees them, they complicate them in a different way but the vision is that of every one else, in short the complication is the complication of the twentieth century but the vision is that of the nineteenth century. Picasso only sees something else, another reality. Complications are always easy but another vision than that of all the world is very rare. That is why geniuses are rare, to complicate things in a new way that is easy, but to see things in a different new way that is really difficult.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Stein’s comparison between the ability of the genius to talk and listen at the same time and the engine’s movement inside a car is important not only because it clearly manifests her constant attention on motion, but also because coupling the internal movement of the car (performed by the motor) to the external movement (the car moving) shows that the experience of being ‘most intensely alive’ involved the coordination of two realities, the inner (or Human Mind, operating inside one like the brain or nervous system in one’s body) and the external (or Human Nature, the background against which one find oneself identified), that although different were nonetheless part of the same thing. Later in my study, I will discuss how the Human Mind and not Human Nature became Stein’s subject in her portraiture.

Gertrude Stein was only seventeen when she started reflecting on the nature of repetition. Like her aunts, she was driven by the desire to know, by curiosity, a quality that is often paired with a clever mind and that would have later proved to be fertile ground for William James’s teaching.

**William James and the new vision of the world**

In 1893, at Radcliffe, Stein entered one of the most fruitful currents of modern thought. She came under the influence of the new philosophers of pragmatism: George Santayana, Hugo Münstenberg and above all William James[[15]](#footnote-15), under whose guidance she became a serious student of philosophy and psychology. The experiments undertaken by Stein will be considered in order to show how the interest in human nature and in movement became two pillars for her philosophical development.

By the 1890s naturalism was beginning its decline in Europe, threatened both by new decadent, impressionist, aesthetic tendencies and by contemporary psychology; but not in the United States, where the situation was somewhat different. In the last half of the nineteenth century technological systems had developed at unprecedented rates, affecting both the urban landscape and its inhabitants. When the Civil War broke out most American citizens were involved in agriculture. By the turn of the century only one-third of the population lived on farms. New York had grown from a city of 500,000 in 1850 to a metropolis of nearly 3.5 million people by 1900. Chicago, at mid-century a town of 20,000 had more than 2 million inhabitants by 1910, its skyscrapers celebrating American industrialism.

But the architectural features were only the shadow of the radical changes American society was undergoing. By 1900 for example, there was almost no trace left of that economy centred on the family business had shaped the idea of Jeffersonian democracy; the majority of workers were now employed by corporations or large enterprises. Human understanding was being revolutionized by the new scientific breakthroughs. In 1890 the French physicist Edouard Branly invented the Branly ‘coherer’ for detecting radio waves. In 1895 Wilhelm Roentgen discovered X-rays and Guglielmo Marconi invented the radio telegraphy; in 1898 the Curies isolated radium, or ‘the metaphysical bomb’. Science was now able to prove the existence of a micro world that was utterly different from the visible one and that obeyed to laws of its own.

Moreover that world was no longer so easily seen in terms of the models of naturalism. As Clive Bush puts it, ‘After Darwin the mechanical model of a world so beloved by the eighteenth-century *philosophes* surrendered to a biological one […] fixity gave way to process, and mechanism to organism.’[[16]](#footnote-16) At the end of the nineteenth century, the theory of evolution, with its possibility of continuing change, and discoveries in the geological field revealing the existence of an incredibly remote past, irreversibly undermined the conventional view of an ordained universe obeying mechanisms set by God, and at the same time stressed man’s ability to master his own destiny. Einstein’s theory of relativity and Freud’s subconscious helped destroy the belief in the possibility of an objective, tranquillizing, unilateral vision of the world. That possibility had been however already seriously jeopardized – from a different point of view – by the interest that nineteenth-century psychology showed in the study of optical illusions, an interest that raised questions about the relativity of individual perception. Science was growing increasingly relativistic, its subject matters uncertainty and chaos. Reality was now seen not as objectively given but subjectively apprehended through consciousness.

In 1893 when Gertrude Stein entered Radcliffe, William James was already a very well-known psychologist and teacher. The discipline was in a deeply unsettled state, still often considered a branch of philosophy and struggling to establish its status as a positivistic science; when James published his grand synthesis in *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, his aim was partly to ground it as an independent science of its own, and in part to put it to work in the world – the burden of so much of his subsequent career.

Exploring the gap between mind and action, James noted that reality was not immediately apprehensible, but needed to be approached through the pragmatic assumption that order has to be gradually won, and is always in the making. (Here are the seeds of Stein’s ‘continuous present’, the ‘immediate existing’ forming the base of her writing.) Hence the psychologist’s attention had to centre on the mechanisms of consciousness themselves. He conceived psychic life as a continuous stream of feelings, where it is impossible to discern the subject from the object, the inside from the outside, consciousness from the world. Laying the foundations for what is called ‘neutral monism’, James set out the view that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world and that there are ‘thoughts’ which perform the function of ‘knowing’, but that thoughts are not made of any different ‘stuff’ from that of which material objects are made. As there is no ontological difference between the mind that perceives an object and the object itself, there is no point in trying to describe the reality of the world in which we are living, for the reality of the world is not something existing in itself and therefore ‘universal’, but the product of our individual consciousness, the result of our personal perception of it. In the *Principles* James defines consciousness as a section of the stream of consciousness, the passing thought being itself the thinker.

The result for Stein is legacy which must be carefully calibrated, since it involves both an extension of James’s thinking and (at times) a challenge directed at his formulae. As Donald Sutherland writes:

It would be neat but absurd to say that she subscribed for life to any of his […] formulations especially since James himself was notorious for provoking his students to do their own thinking and for insisting that ultimately one’s philosophical beliefs are determined by personal temperament. […] While she was a favourite pupil she was not his creature. He did not have creatures.

Still she could scarcely have helped being deeply influenced by the new crisis in the question of consciousness the way it was put.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In her sophomore year at Radcliffe Stein enrolled in English 22, an English composition course, taught by the poet William Vaughn Moody. It is in her Radcliffe themes, her first serious efforts at writing, that certain of her attitudes are revealed. One of the most passionate essays she wrote for Moody’s course left no doubts about her admiration for James:

Is life worth living? Yes, a thousand times yes when the world still holds such spirits as Prof. James. He is truly a man among men; (A) a scientist of force and originality, embodying all that is strongest and worthiest in the scientific spirit; (A) a metaphysician skilled in abstract thought, clear and vigorous and yet too great to worship logic as his God, and narrow himself to a belief merely in the reason of man.[[18]](#footnote-18)

James was particularly interested in learning more about the distinction between the conscious and the subconscious mind. His interest in spiritualism and automatic writing led him to propose a series of experiments in which the subject was tested under varying conditions of fatigue and distraction.

From the beginning, Gertrude Stein showed a certain distrust of the unconscious and subconscious mind, as in one of her Radcliffe themes where she describes her experience as an experimental subject:

Next she finds herself with a complicated apparatus strapped across her breast to register her breathing, her finger imprisoned in a steel machine and her arm thrust immovably into a big glass tube… Strange fancies begin to crowd upon her, she feels that the silent pen is writing on and on forever. Her record is there she cannot escape it and the group about her begin to assume the shape of mocking friends gloating over her imprisoned misery.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In September 1896 the series of experiments in automatic reading and writing that she conducted with a graduate student and friend, Leon Solomons, was published in the Harvard *Psychological Review* under the title ‘Normal Motor Automatism’, her first published piece of writing. With she and Solomons as the only subjects involved, the experiments, aiming at showing that automatic behaviour and ‘hysterical’ behaviour were analogous, posed a set of problems which were to occupy her in differing ways well into her literary career.

Stein and Solomon wanted to prove that motor automatism in the normal subject with his conscious attention voluntarily distracted was capable of the elementary feats performed by the second personalities in hysterical cases. Had this proved true, it would have followed that the “second personality” was an unnecessary hypothesis for explaining hysterical phenomena and that therefore the issue of subliminal consciousness could be at some extent dismissed at least for the moment being[[20]](#footnote-20):

We would not, the histerique can not, attend to these sensations [of automatic activity]. Whatever else hysteria may be then, this, at least, seems most probable. It is a disease of attention.[[21]](#footnote-21)

An attempt at automatic writing saw Stein producing a few lines that, featuring a strong tendency to repetition, seem an anticipation of her later style: ‘When he could not be the longest and thus to be, and thus to be, the strongest’. When later critics maintained they could trace the roots of her mature writing style to her experiments in automatic writing, she replied that neither she nor Solomons had ‘been doing automatic writing, we always knew what we were doing’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Stein furthermore maintained that she

never had subconscious reactions, nor was she a successful subject for automatic writing. One of the students in the psychological seminar of which Gertrude Stein, although an undergraduate was at William James’ particular request a member, was carrying on a series of experiments on suggestion to the subconscious. When he read his paper upon the result of his experiments, he began by explaining that one of the subjects gave absolutely no results and as much lowered the average and made the conclusion of his experiments false he wished to be allowed to cut this record out. Whose record is it, said James. Miss Stein’s, said the student. Ah, said James, if Miss Stein gave no response I should say that it was as normal not to give a response as to give one and decidedly the result must not be cut out.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Encouraged by James (who did not fail to appreciate her potential[[24]](#footnote-24)), a further series of experiments was conducted by Stein alone and published after she had left Radcliffe in the *Psychological Review* for May 1898, entitled ‘Cultivated Motor Automatism: A Study of Character in its Relation to Attention’. This time the emphasis shifted from the different kind of actions that ‘normal’ persons could perform automatically, to the differing capabilities of individuals to perform particular automatic actions. Her aim was to produce a larger sample of normal subjects in automatic writing, but the study is particularly revealing because it is here that Stein first manifested her interest in two aspects around which later her career as a writer would develop: the character of her subjects; and the issue of *movement*, seen as the physical manifestation of a mental process in action:

I have attempted to examine the phenomena of normal automatism by a study of normal individuals, both in regard to the variations in this capacity found in a large number of subjects, and also in regard to the type of character that accompany a greater or less tendency to automatic action.[[25]](#footnote-25)

For these experiments she suspended from a high ceiling a board large enough to support the forearm of the subject, the hand hanging over and holding a pencil. This planchette, a device Stein adopted at Professor E. B. Delabarre’s suggestion, responded to very slight movement and could be adjusted allowing the operator to move it and guide the subject without his knowledge:

By lightly resting my hand on the board after starting a movement I could deceive the subject, who sat with closed eyes, as to whether he or I was making the movement, and I could judge also how readily he yielded to a newly suggested movement, or if he resisted it strongly.

Stein aimed at teaching her subjects a new movement without them being aware of it. When the subject’s attention was fully distracted she would at first slowly then more rapidly guide the planchette into the movement she wished to teach; after a while she would release the board. She observed that the subject the first times would at first either stop or return to the old movement. She would then guide again and then release until the new movement was learned. It is by means of a very peculiar metaphor, reflecting the Darwinian attitude of the period, that Stein describes the pattern of learning which involves a constant reversion to the old way:

At first there was a continued return to the old movement or to no movement, but gradually came an aimless indefinite movement, then again the old, then the new, and then again an uncertain movement, then a more decided revision of the new, then a slight return to the old, like the struggle between two themes in a musical composition, until at last the new movement conquered and was freely continued.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The paper continues dividing the subject in two types. She described Type I as consisting ‘mostly of girls who are found naturally in literature courses and men who are going in for law’. She described them as ‘nervous, high-strung, very imaginative, has the capacity to be easily roused and intensely interested’. Type II was instead ‘more varied, and gives more interesting results. In general the individuals often blonde and pale, are distinctly phlegmatic. If emotional, decidedly of a weakish sentimental order’.

It is clear then how rather than on the outcome of her experiments, Stein was naturally inclined to focus her attention on the students that had made the experiment possible. Although one cannot avoid noting that her character analysis and typology was oversimplified, it nonetheless represents an important piece of evidence attesting her early need to group people in units, preferably two units, a need that would have later found its expression in the method she adopted in *The Making of Americans*, the work that better represents Stein’s initial understanding as science as mechanistic.

Stein’s article is particularly interesting because it represents the first piece of evidence of her lifelong fascination with movement. Both sets of experiments were designed to test the extent of what could be considered ‘automatic’ actions in ‘normal’ persons. I have already considered how in the experiments performed in collaboration with Leo Solomons, the subjects, were expected to produce samples of a so-called automatic writing (Stein, for example, came out with ‘when he could not be the longest and thus to be, and thus to be, the strongest’). But when Stein worked on her own, even though in her own article she talked in terms of automatic writing, the outcome of the subjects’ response was instead a circle, a curve, an m-figure or the figure eight. And that outcome, as it has already been suggested, was the result of Stein’s effort to teach the subject a new movement that she herself had started. Movement in this case is then both the vehicle through which information is consciously transmitted, and the way in which the subject’s subconscious demonstrates that it has received the information (or not, if failing to reproduce the figure taught). The subjects’ bodily movement in other words is, in Stein’s experiments, the proof of a cognitive experience in progress.

**The Road to *Tender Buttons***

And I want to tell you about the gradual making of *The Making of Americans*. I made it gradually and it took me almost three years to make it, but that is not what I mean by gradual. What I mean by gradual is the way the preparation was made inside of me [[27]](#footnote-27)

Stein began *The Making of Americans* early in 1903 and completed it in 1911. This period of time constitutes a seminal period for her growth as a writer. It was in 1911 that she undertook a trip to Spain that marked a momentous turning point in her literary methodology, leading her to the composition of *Tender Buttons*, a work in which for the first time Stein came to term with the issue of the newly discovered physical world, which in *The Making of Americans* she had largely ignored. Critics tend to view the two books mainly as examples of Stein’s dramatic changes of style, from narrative to abstract, and much has been paid to the different phases Stein went through while writing this book. What I will try to do here will be to stress the importance that those shifts had in the composition of *Tender Buttons.*

I would suggest that although certainly focusing on the ‘inner world’, in *The Making of Americans*, or at least in the final stages of its composition where the novel’s plot is so attenuated to be almost lost to notice, and where the typological descriptions of characters are so loaded with ambiguities to bring the characterization itself into question, Stein was already dealing with the issue that is universally recognized as the central focus of *Tender Buttons*, the world of mere external being. I will suggest the centrality of the role played by the issue of movement, not only as inspiration but also as subject matter in both *The Making of Americans*  and in *Tender Buttons.*

Initially, *The Making of Americans* was meant to be a history of a ‘decent family’s progress’. But during the years necessary to its composition, the novel underwent two main shifts.[[28]](#footnote-28) First, it turned into a peculiar psychological experiment in which Stein attempted to write ‘a history of every one who ever was or is or will be living’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The second major displacement of its central subject involved a turning from the type categorizations to examine what will now gradually become the true subject: the study of herself in relation to her ongoing perceptions and formulations; the writer in the act of writing.

Stein began the novel during a brief residence in New York in 1903, but its stimulus has to be traced back to her stay in England in the winter of the previous year. In September Gertrude and Leo Stein left their rooms at 20 Bloomsbury Square in London and journeyed to Surrey to join the art historian Bernard Berenson, whom Leo had met two years earlier in Florence, and his wife in their cottage at Friday’s Hill. Mrs. Berenson’s sister, Alys, was married to Bertrand Russell and his work soon became a fundamental element of the spirited debates that Gertrude Stein had with the Berenson circle. It was during these arguments Stein began to meditate on what it meant to be an American. The passion she poured into those debates about the merits of American democracy is echoed in the opening of the earlier version of the novel:

It has always seemed to me a rare privilege this of being an American, a real American and yet one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete. The old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old that is the story I mean to tell for that is what really is and what I really know.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Vibrating with a patriotic pride founded on the equation of America and modernity, this passage introduces two fundamental issues, space and time, or according to her definition, ‘the very American thing’. Belonging to a very young nation, Stein maintains, nothing could be easier than for an American family to consider its genealogical background. This reflection is immediately followed by the far less reassuring acknowledgement of the double nature of being an American, ‘an old people in a new world’. Living in a foreign country all her life, she made of the being ‘other’ from the indigenous people almost a strong point, as only being distant from her mother tongue could her writing flow freely; only being a foreigner could she express genius. Having been a traveller all her life, the sense of distance, of movement, of time and space together with a deep-rooted awareness of her being American is a constant in her work.

In ‘The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*’ she explains that

this is why after all this book is an American book, because this thing is an essentially American thing this sense of a space of time and what is to be done within this space of time not in any way excepting in the way that it is inevitable that there is this space of time and anybody who is an American feels what is inside this space of time and so well they do what they do within this space of time and so ultimately it is a thing contained within…

I am always trying to tell this thing that a space of time is a natural thing for an American to always have inside them as something in which they are continuously moving. Think of anything, of cowboys, of movies, of detective stories, of anybody who goes anywhere or stays at home and is an American and you will realize that it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always filled with moving and my first real effort to express this thing which is an American thing began in writing *The Making of Americans.[[31]](#footnote-31)*

Introducing the story of the migration of Europeans to America, the opening pages of the novel seem a clear indication that the book will be in fact a prototypical American epic. Soon however the narrative style fades away to be replaced by a method that Stein developed with the purpose of making lengthy inventories of characterological types:

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In her lecture ‘Portraits as Repetition’, delivered to American audiences in the mid-thirties, Stein’s insistence on the word ‘movement’ to describe the inner self’s reality, offers the reader a crucial clue of what might have been the root of her eventual giving up portraits: the realization that it did not matter how stubbornly she fought, the most important feature of every living creature, its very essence, movement, could never be described:

I had to find out what it was inside any one, and by any one I mean every one I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did not by how much or how little they resembled any other one but I had to find out by the intensity of the movement that there was inside in any one of them.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The excerpts also clearly reveal how already at this early stage of the composition, Stein’s interest laid in the ‘movement’ of thoughts and words, rather than in what was ‘everybody’ actually saying or thinking.

The next step came when Stein’s attention naturally shifted from her characters’ inner self to her own, a passage mirroring her experience at Radcliffe:

While I was at college and doing philosophy and psychology I became more and more interested in my own mental and physical processes and less in that of others and all I then was learning of what made people what they were came to me by experience and not by talking and listening.[[34]](#footnote-34)

That return to the personal is reflected in the work that Stein wrote in the period of dormancy which interrupted the long novel. Stein wrote two short novels (*Q.E.D.,* 1903, and *Fernhurst*, 1904-05, eventually embedded into the narrative of *The Making of Americans*) and the stories published as *Three Lives*, which she finished in the spring of 1906. Stein claimed that the stylistic method of *Three Lives* had been influenced by the Cézanne portrait under which she sat writing, the famous portrait of ‘Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair’ (1877). Leo Stein had first been introduced to Cézanne’s work by Berenson, during his stay in Florence and soon became one of his most passionate collectors and connoisseurs. He wrote:

Cézanne’s essential problem is mass and he has succeeded in rendering mass with a vital intensity that is unparalleled in the whole history of painting. No matter what his subject is-the figure, the landscape, still life – there is always this remorseless intensity, this endless absolute self-existing quality of mass. There can scarcely be such a thing as a completed Cézanne. Every canvas is a battlefield and victory an unattainable ideal. Cézanne rarely does more than one thing at a time and when he turns to composition he brings to bear the same intensity, keying his composition up till it sings like a harp string.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Interestingly, Leo Stein’s analysis of Cézanne’s creative process lingers exactly over the kind of qualities that he always failed to recognize in his sister’s work, a failure that eventually resulted in their breaking up. The sense of struggle is present in all of Stein’s writings, and so is her striving after the realization of her works as a ‘mass’ or totality.

Observing Cézanne working must have been a quite an experience. ‘He would look fiercely at his subject for minutes on end, then suddenly dart at his canvas or paper and put down a single touch of colour. Each of the marks he made grew out of observation, scrutiny and analysis, an attempt to crystallize his perceptual experience as areas of pigment.’[[36]](#footnote-36) There is nothing here of the traditional image of the artist suffused with divine inspiration, of work as the product of an almost effortless natural process. The artist is now caught in the frantic attempt to capture on canvas the instant in which the visual perception crystallises on his retina, in other words to capture on canvas the present itself. But how? In a letter of 1904 to Emile Bernard, he wrote: ‘This is true, without any possible doubt - I am quite positive:- an optical sensation is produced in our visual organs which allows us to classify the planes represented by colour sensations as light, half tone or quarter tone. Light, therefore, does not exist for the painter.’[[37]](#footnote-37) As a painter he could rely exclusively on the interactions of colours to re-create light and space on canvas. This was now the aim of the twentieth-century artist, the re-creation and not the mere imitation of reality. As a writer, Stein had to deal with parallel problems, only with the pair ‘light and colour’ substituted by the terms ‘language and word’.

As Cézanne built his portrait brush stroke after brush stroke, laying down touch after touch following the natural perceptive flow, carefully negotiating with every plane, so Gertrude Stein was struggling with her medium, words, to fix her characters through her repetitive sentences. She gradually began to be obsessed by the impossibility of ‘putting down’ what she called the ‘rhythm of each human being’. After a long and tormented process of analysis and acquaintance, she seems to have finally managed to conceive in herself and somehow grasp the real essence of ‘what was inside each one which made them that one’, but she was confronted with the limits of her medium, with the impossibility of achieving through writing the sort of result that it is possible to achieve in painting, when, once the picture has been completed, the observer can enjoy it as a whole, immediately, quite as if its creation was taking place in the moment in which its image reaches the observer’s visual apparatus:

When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of a personality that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time. Now that may never have been a trouble to you but it was a terrible trouble for me. And a great deal of *The Making of the Americans* was a struggle to do this thing, to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out, but it was a whole there then within me and as such it had to be said. [[38]](#footnote-38)

It was an impossible achievement and Stein was fully aware of this. Her fierce struggle with words, sentences, and paragraphs notwithstanding, she eventually had to give up and accept the fact ‘that after all the human being essentially is not paintable’[[39]](#footnote-39); its essence, movement, certainly was not.

**The visual revolution and lost time: Chronophotography and the continuous present**

The child born in 1900 would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it, and an education that would fit it. He would find himself in a land where no one had ever penetrated before; where order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature; artificial compulsion imposed on motion; against which every free energy of the universe revolted; and which, being merely occasional, resolved back into anarchy at last. He could not deny that the law of the new multiverse explained much that had been most obscure.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The sense of radical change present in Henry Adams’s words (written in 1903) was not uncommon as the twentieth century arrived. But Gertrude Stein, far from being shocked or scared by the scientific breakthroughs of her era responded to them enthusiastically with an absolute faith in what Adams called the ‘creative promise’ the new century was about to bring. She was fascinated by technical innovations, and adored cars, the icons of modern society:

We were crossing streets and the crowds were looking curiously at this bronzed-faced woman whose picture had been so often in the papers, but she was unaware of them, it seemed to me, but extraordinary aware of the movement around her and especially of taxicabs.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Stein often referred metaphorically to cars, in order to explain her literary method:

As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going. [[42]](#footnote-42)

Movement also took the shape of an inborn instinct linked to her being American:

As an American she had both an impulse for complete immobility and an impulse for very fast movement of an extremely detached kind, that in a movement which depends neither on occasion nor situation, like the movement of a plane or a fast automobile or, often enough, the movies.[[43]](#footnote-43)

… and we in America have tried to make this thing a real thing, if the movement, that is any movement, is lively enough, perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything. [[44]](#footnote-44)

Stein, in other words, enthusiastically embraced the century that had just begun and was well intentioned to leave a remarkable trace behind her. She boldly declared in 1943 that ‘I was there to kill what was not dead, the nineteenth century which was so sure of evolution and prayers.’[[45]](#footnote-45)

One of the most important features of the early twentieth century and one very much linked to the modern understanding of temporality as acceleration or speed, is the mechanical reproduction whose advent brought to the world both the promise of storing time and a serious threat to the symbolic system that had until then enabled the Western culture to preserve time:

What was new about the storage capability of the phonogram and the cinematograph, and both names refer, not accidentally, to writing, was their ability to store time: as a mixture of audio frequencies in the acoustic realm, as a movement of single picture sequences in the optic realm. Time, however, is what determines the limits of all art. The quotidian data flow must be arrested before it can become image or sign…Whatever runs as time on a physical or … real level, blindly and unpredictably, could by no means be encoded. Therefore all data flows, if they were real streams of data, had to pass through the defile of the signifier.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Before the invention of phonography and cinema, Europe’s only means of preserving time were written texts and musical scores, along with ‘fast’ visual media like the sketch, with writing as the only medium through which they both found expression. The emergence of mechanical reproduction with its apparent capability to incorporate the flowing of time itself, with no evident need to ‘arrest the quotidian data flow’, inevitably stressed the limits of printed words. The new cinematic technology thus triggered a cross-examination of the problem of time representation, engaging virtually every aspect of human knowledge: philosophy, psychoanalysis and science.

It is at least legitimate to suppose that Stein must have been keen to accept the challenge. In order to achieve her stated goal, namely to kill the nineteenth century together with its faith forever wavering between an immanent worldly order (evolution) and a supernatural almighty Creator (prayers), Stein had to find the way to overcome the limitations of her medium and manage somehow to include movement, the main feature of every living creature and the signature of the new technological era. In this respect, I would argue that Stein considered cinema and the visual techniques that accompanied its rise as a key tool rather than as an element to be countered.

In *Portraits and Repetitions* Stein explains her technique as follows:

In the beginning … I continued to do what I was doing in *The Making of the Americans*, I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing…

I of course did not think of it in terms of the cinema, in fact I doubt whether at that time I had ever seen a cinema but, and I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one’s period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production. And each one of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In many ways this points forwards to her later plays, but we need to also see it work in earlier texts. *Tender Buttons* constitutes Stein’s first serious attempt to fix on paper, to isolate, the various different stages in which reality’s epiphany took place in the mind of the observer. An epiphany that could reveal itself for the first time only when, thanks to the newly discovered means of mechanical reproduction provided by such techniques as Marey’s chronophotography, the mystery of movement, the essence of life had been revealed.

In the early 1870s, following the development of new photographic techniques, particularly the new gelatin-bromide process in England, a faster range of exposures became possible, greatly exceeding the human eye’s perceptual ability. As Walter Benjamin noted:

While it is possible to give an account of how people walk, if only in the most inexact way, all the same we know nothing definite of the positions involved in the fraction of a second when the step is taken [[48]](#footnote-48)

Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, both primary scientific precursors of the cinema, perfectly embodying the turn of the century spirit which addresses this problem, attempting to make an invisible time optically legible. Although driven by the same desire to know what happens in that infinitesimal lapse of time covering a fraction of a second, in other words to give visibility to that aspect of time that cannot be caught by our visual apparatus, they adopted different techniques to depict bodies in movement.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a general movement within physiology aiming at creating a concept of life adequate to modernity, therefore including movement, change, and process.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is therefore not surprising that one of its most enthusiastic exponents was indeed a physiologist. Marey proclaimed that ‘motion is the most apparent of the characteristics of life; it manifests itself in all the functions; it is even the essence of several of them’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The object of his interest was therefore movement itself, specifically the relation between space and time as a body changes position. His first attempts to measure and graph movements relied on a series of instruments that he constructed himself. In Marey’s view, in order to measure correctly the movement of the body under examination, it was crucial for these instruments to be directly connected to the source of their tracing:

In experiments…which deal with time measurements, it is of immense importance that the graphic record should be automatically registered, in fact, that the phenomenon should give on paper its own record of duration, and of the moment of production. This method, in the cases in which it is applicable, is almost perfect.[[51]](#footnote-51)

‘Almost’ because Marey was well aware of the inherent imperfection of the resistant properties of the instruments used for the charting. His search for a method less intrusive as possible of connecting object and representation together with his passion for indexicality and the need to freeze an action in the instant it took place, led him to identify in photography the privileged mode of scientific representation. In 1878 Eadweard Muybridge’s work was published in the French journal *La Nature* and it was by coming across his photographs that Marey decided to replace some of his graphic inscriptors with photographic ones, beginning to develop the technique which he later labelled as ‘chronophotography’.

Using wet collodion plates and shutter speeds around 1/1000th of a second, Muybridge produced his sequential photographs of moving horses. To make the photographs, Muybridge lined a raceway with fifteen-foot sheeting, upon which lines were drawn at twenty-one-inch intervals. As a horse rushed past, its hooves tripped cotton threads, which in turn tripped shutters on twelve cameras set up opposite the sheeting. Muybridge’s photographs resolved an age-old question for equine experts and painters: do all four legs of the horse leave the ground when the horse moves quickly? The dismissing of the traditional ‘flying gallop’ position caused surprise to such an extent that many people at first refused to believe what the photographs showed.

Unlike Marey, Muybridge’s attention was focused on the horse’s anatomy rather than on its motion; that is, its movement related to the environment. Thus the positions presented in separately framed images are not linked by any relations of casual necessity; they did not preserve the passage of time either, for the timing of the exposures was governed by the spacing of the cameras, not by equal temporal intervals. There is no sense of continuity in Muybridge’s images, but rather a vague sense of before and after. As Jonathan Crary comments, ‘Muybridge, with his modular segmentation of images, breaks down the possibility of a “truthful” syntax, and his aggregate presentations set up an atomized field that an observer cannot seamlessly rebind.’[[52]](#footnote-52) And as Marta Braun has discovered, Muybridge often fabricated his final composite pictures, assembling images that play upon the willingness of the eye and mind to see photographs arranged from left to right as having been taken in that order.[[53]](#footnote-53)

In contrast, what Marey offered with his chronophotography was an unaltered scientific investigation analyzing in greater detail the successive spatial positions of the subject photographed. Unlike Muybridge, he used a single camera and a rotating disk with small slots cut into it at regular intervals which was spun in front of an open camera lens. As a result, a person walking in front of this apparatus would be in a different position each time the open slot on the disk allowed the image to register. All of the recorded successive positions of a single subject where included within the same frame by the chronophotograph, showing human movement in time and space. The observer, being faced with the repeated image of the subject progressively changing his position, could get no sense of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ at all. Marey’s desire to decrease the intervals between the successive positions of the subject to make the movement’s temporal progression more and more clear, resulted in the images’ superimposition, with figures overlapping and thus creating a sense of continuum never before experimented in the history of visual perception. As Braun points out,

the chronophotographs’ novelty would certainly have been disconcerting to the untutored viewer, because the traditional Western pictorial delineation of time and space would make them hard to read. Since the advent of linear perspective in the Renaissance, the frame of an image has, with rare exceptions, been understood to enclose a temporal and spatial unity. We read what occurs within the frame as happening at a single instant in time and in a single space. Marey’s photographs shattered that unity; viewers now had to unravel the successive parts of the work in order to understand that they were looking not at several men moving in single file, but at a single figure successively occupying a series of positions in space.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The observer of Marey’s chronophotographs and the reader faced with Gertrude Stein’s continuous present must have been gripped by the same sense of dismay. Neither the view of the reiterated images nor the reading of a text formed by a monotonous set of sentences were to find a receptive audience that easily. In their own respective artistic fields the techniques they adopted aimed at giving for the first time a reliable representation of movement, whether intended as physical description or more abstractly as ‘the rhythm of each human being’[[55]](#footnote-55), even though to do so meant to display features of it that seemed counter-intuitive. As Aaron Scharf puts it, the point was that ‘the meaning of the term “truth to nature” lost its force: what was true could not always be seen, and what could be seen was not always true’.[[56]](#footnote-56)

As discoveries within geology and the physical science revealed a past almost unimaginable for its antiquity, and the theory of evolution suggested the possibility of continuing change, the ‘modern’ perspective of past and future developed for the first time. The reassuring conventional view of human civilization based on ideas of a divinely ordained universe, and the concept of change itself seen as an exception to the general rule of stasis was no longer possible. Faced with the task of charting the new reality, the traditional form of the novel was under pressure. The novel was no longer the only custodian of amusement and moral elevation, and had to face up to new expressive means, such as those offered by the rise of journalism, photography and cinema. Muybridge’s revealing pictures of the galloping horses are a good example of how (as Susan Sontag puts it) ‘Like the post-romantic novelist and the reporter, the photographer was supposed to unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance. This was a task which painting was too slow and cumbersome a procedure to take on.’[[57]](#footnote-57)

Since the invention of the first cameras in France and England in the early 1840s, directly or indirectly photography influenced art. Such artists as the French painter Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier and Thomas Eakins made their painting of horses accord with what the photographs showed, rather than what the eye perceived. The photographer Albert Londe (1858-1917), who worked with the French physician and neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at La Salpetrière during the 1880s, extended his medical photography into the creating of X-ray photographs and the study of movement. As Mary Warner Marien points out, a line drawing by Paul Richer, based on one of Londe’s stop-action photographs, may have provided the Marcel Duchamp with the visual vocabulary for *Nude Descending a Staircase # 2* (1912) [[58]](#footnote-58). In 1909, in *Camera Work*, Steiglitz, although citing only the Impressionists, notes the undeniable influence of photography on painting; and more pertinently to my point, Moholy-Nagy in *The New Vision* points out that ‘the technique and spirit of photography directly or indirectly influenced Cubism’[[59]](#footnote-59) Even without considering the fact that Stein’s whole mature life was witnessed by the eye of the camera, with Man Ray as something of an official photographer at the Rue de Fleurus, and Carl Van Vechten taking hundreds of pictures of her as Stein’s unofficial American agent, if we accept Moholy-Nagy’ s view, the connections between Stein and photography become evident.

The most striking feature that Marey and Stein share in terms of technique is the fact that both blur the lines between chronological stages, sweeping away the barriers dividing the past from the future, and so creating a sort of temporal continuum, or a ‘continuous present’, as Stein referred to it. In ‘Portraits and Repetition’ she compares her method of composing portraits to the cinematic technique, stressing that in both cases there is no repetition involved and most importantly that in order to create a ‘present something’ there must be no remembering:

You see what I was doing in my beginning portrait writing and you also understand what I mean when I say there was no repetition. In a cinema picture no two pictures are exactly alike each one is just that much different from the one before, and so in those early portraits there was…as there was in *The Making of the Americans* no repetition. Each time that I said the somebody whose portrait I was writing was something that something was just that much different from what I had just said that somebody was and little by little in this way a whole portrait came into being, a portrait that was not description and that was made by each time, and I did a great many times, say it, that somebody was something, each time there was a difference just a difference enough so that it could go on and be a present something…You see that in order to do this there must be no remembering, remembering is repetition, remembering is also confusion.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Stein suggests that while writing her portraits, every time she thought she had managed to single out from the continuous flux of time an aspect of somebody’s personality, as soon as she fixed that particular aspect on paper, that aspect had already transformed, assuming a different hue, no matter how slightly, which cast a different light on the subject. The process had to be repeated once more, ‘beginning again and again’ and this is how ‘a whole portrait came into being’. This is also how the ‘continuous present’ came into being:

In making those portraits I naturally made a continuous present an including everything and beginning again and again….

So then I as a contemporary creating the composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again and then everything being alike then everything very simply everything was naturally simply different and so I as a contemporary was creating everything being alike was creating everything naturally being naturally simply different, everything being alike.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Michael J. Hoffmann describes the style of *The Making of Americans*, which found its full-scale development in the portraits, as ‘cinema technique’. He maintains that as in a moving picture, she repeats almost exactly the same image in each frame:

but, in the cinema, each frame has a subtle variation so that, when the film is passed quickly through the projector, the viewer perceives on the screen the sensation of movement. And such is the intent of Stein’s ‘cinema technique’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

As Stein explains in ‘Portraits and Repetition’*,* in writing portraits she could not avoid noticing ‘the little things that made of any one some one resembling some one’. She realized that ‘Any one does of course by any little thing by any little way by any little expression, any one does of course resemble some one’.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The problem she had to face at that point was that if it was true that everybody resembled somebody, then it was impossible to create a portrait that was the portrait of that specific person only; the resemblance between the subject and somebody else would have automatically included the ‘somebody else’ as part of the picture, ‘and in so doing they have to remember some one’. Stein could not let ‘memory’ interfere with any stage of her creation. To do so would have meant to fall once again in the stream of the traditional novelistic pattern of storytelling, with the omniscient narrator paternalistically addressing the readers and events unraveling following a chronologically fixed plot. Like Marey (who, unlike Muybridge, was not interested in describing the subject of his pictures), what engaged Stein had nothing to do with telling a story and therefore with the concepts of memory or the past. She wanted to capture the essence of the very existence of a person. That essence of course was not formed by physical features whatsoever, it was the way each one ‘was existing’ and was therefore unique for every human being: ‘In other words the making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or anything.’

But how could the ‘being existing’ of anyone, in other words, the mere fact of being alive, the inherent psychic movement of a personality itself, be ever captured by words? Stein, not without a pinch of bitterness, had to admit that

Funnily enough the cinema has offered a solution of this thing. By a continuously moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing and there is that thing existing, it is in a way if you like one portrait of anything not a number of them. [[64]](#footnote-64)

In order to understand what Stein meant by asserting that the portrait of ‘the thing existing’ could be achieved through a ‘continuously moving picture’ thanks to which ‘there is no memory of any other thing’ it is crucial to consider Stein’s theory of the moment of discontinuity between ‘being’ and ‘existence’.

One of Stein’s basic assumptions was that there was no immortality for human personality, an awareness possibly fostered by the early deaths of her parents. As a child she had been astonished to learn that ‘in the Old Testament there was nothing about a future life or eternity’.[[65]](#footnote-65) That early realization was later reinforced by a knowledge of astronomy which confirmed for her the finality of individual death; and there is no doubt that within human experience, death is certainly the most dramatic example of discontinuity and of end. But if we accept the fact that something can actually end, then questions immediately arise concerning its beginnings. Stein everywhere implies (especially in *The Geographical History of America*) that she accepts William James’ belief of novelty as a genuine element in the cosmos, as well as the orthodox scientific view that presupposes an infinite past actuality. Allegra Stewart argues that the assumption that the cosmic process has an infinite past and infinite future confronted the determinist Stein with a puzzling dilemma:

There must be the possibility of being for anything to have become actual; but if time has no beginning, the possibility of being must always have resided in some actuality. Now actuality involves determinations; and an infinite past actuality seems to imply that destiny is fated, and that all that happens must happen as a consequence of an infinity of prior determinations.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Stein attempted to solve the dilemma theorizing a moment of discontinuity between being and existence, with ‘being’ meaning ‘self-activity’ (the inner psychic processes of the human mind, namely ‘memory’, closely related to the past) and ‘existence’ its life history. Stein thought that when the links between being and existence loosened, when the connection between the past determining factors and the future was temporarily interrupted, there in that ‘point of unhooking’ it was possible to assist at ‘the emergence of new forms in the cosmic process or, in man’s experience, to a state of enlarged consciousness’.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Despite its mysterious nature, Allegra Stewart points out that the experience of disconnection ‘is not strange to anyone who has ever forgotten himself, lost all self-consciousness in the presence of a great work of art-or in a moment of absorbed intellectual activity’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Interestingly enough, while trying to define the essence of ‘rhythm’, a recurring theme that will be discussed in more depth in the second chapter, Giulio Agamben describes that ‘experience of disconnection’ as *ek-stasis*:

rhythm […] appears to introduce into this eternal flow [time] a split and a stop. Thus in a musical piece, although it is somehow in time, we perceive rhythm as something that escapes the incessant flight of instants and appears almost as the presence of an atemporal dimension I time. In the same way, when we are before a work of art or a landscape bathed in the light of its own presence, we perceive a stop in time, as though we were suddenly thrown into a more original tie. There is a stop, an interruption in the incessant flow of instants that, coming from the future, sinks into the past, and this interruption, this stop is precisely what gives and reveals the particular status, the mode of presence proper to the work of art or the landscape we have before our eyes. We are as though held, arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an *ek-stasis* in a more original dimension. [[69]](#footnote-69)

During these moments when the mind is totally absorbed in itself, memory is not even an issue, and neither are past and future. It is as if time suspended its flow, allowing the mystery of the creative insight in man to take place in a sort of a stretched present moment.

It was precisely after having forgotten herself when confronted with the presence of the Spanish landscape that Gertrude Stein’s mind first focused on the visible world. After years spent working on *The Making of the Americans*, trying to grasp what could not be seen, the essence of a human being, anddeveloping her own perception of a simple final present, the ‘continuous present’, on May 1, 1910 Stein began her journey to Spain. She was now about to be confronted with something with whom she had never dealt before, the apparently simple and unquestionable physical presence of things.

We enjoyed Granada, we met many amusing people english and spanish and it was there and at that time that Gertrude Stein’s style gradually changed. She says hitherto she had been interested only in the insides of the people, their character and what went on inside them, it was during that summer that she first felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The impact with the simple presence of the powerful Spanish landscape, so still, so overwhelming and indisputably ‘there’ could hardly have been more dramatic. As Donald Sutherland points out

It does not change and melt and grow like an English landscape nor can it be reduced to distances like an American landscape…The landscape and the things in or on it are absolutely and fully there. They make a challenge to man, to be, as absolutely, as unchangeably, as they are. Man has to counter the landscape with an equivalent reality. Which is why not only *Quijote* but also the saints of Greco, the arabesques of Alhambra, the *Cid*, the Spanish mystics, the inventions of Picasso, the rhetoric of Seneca, and the rituals of bullfighting are all about.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Stein, in her own account, plunged herself in that ‘long tormenting process’, by which ‘she looked, listened and described’, registering the newly-discovered world of things and in so doing putting herself once more to the test.[[72]](#footnote-72) For the ‘simple final presence’ of landscape seemed to her almost a projection in material terms of her ‘simple final present’[[73]](#footnote-73). Because of her philosophical background Stein ‘always was, she always is tormented by the problem of the external and the internal’[[74]](#footnote-74), and soon the problem of relating the two realities in writing became an urge she had to come to term with.

As it has been considered above, in the previous stage of her artistic development, while dealing with the elaboration of the ‘continuous present’, Stein had found a source of inspiration in cinematic technique. Despite the view of her detractors, Stein’s investigation of the expressive potentialities of language always followed an utterly rational pattern, never pulling away from the teachings received by the pragmatic school of James in her early years at Radcliffe College. ‘Movement’ had been the key to find a way to portray the essence of the existence of a human being, and it was once again at ‘movement’ that Stein had to look in order to solve the Spanish dilemma: how could the ‘spiritual meaning’ of a personality, as Sutherland calls it, be linked to the physical reality of the external world? Once again the inspiration to solve the problem came to Stein through the observation of other arts: Spanish dancing and bullfighting, where, as Sutherland points out, ‘the greatest possible pressure of immediate spiritual meaning is put upon the physical, where the minutest physical differences make all the difference’; where the external and the internal world constitute a wholeness by means of ‘movement’.[[75]](#footnote-75) From that moment on, Stein gave up her ‘cinema technique’, stopped considering ‘movement’ only as source of inspiration useful to recreate on the page her interior time. With *Tender Buttons* and the first phase of her playwriting she focused her attention on ‘movement’ itself.

**Stein and the Critics: Cubism and *Tender Buttons***

The uniqueness of Stein’s position within modern literature often provoked violent reactions in her contemporaries; this in turn had repercussions crucial to the later reception of her work. Before plunging into an analysis of *Tender Buttons* itself, attempting to provide a new perspective of her work, I would like to consider briefly Stein’s position in twentieth-century criticism.

In her attempt to achieve a literary abstract style, Stein consciously struggled to minimize psychological overtones and to eliminate any allusion to possible referents outside her own production. As a result students of Stein can rely neither on analytic psychology nor on cultural anthropology as useful means to ‘understand’ her achievements. In other words, Gertrude Stein’s writings simply do not fit into the mainstream of twentieth-century criticism. It may be because they somehow appeal to a primordial ‘xenophobic’ instinct that on more than a few occasions, Stein’s operas and indeed Stein herself, have been the target of critics impatient to see her work discarded as the product of a ‘charlatan’ or ferociously attempting to deny her even the right to be called an artist.

The following passage, for example, appeared in June 1914 in the *Chicago Tribune*, shortly after the publication of *Tender Buttons:*

*Tender Buttons* is the most recent product of Miss Gertrude Stein, the literary cubist. Miss Stein, an affluent American resident in Paris, has been for years the high Priestess of the New Artists, the Cubists and Futurists. Her own gyrations with words have been printed before, but Privately *Tender Buttons* is the first volume to be vouchsafed the Public.

It is a nightmare journey in unknown and uncharted seas. Miss Stein’s followers believe she has added a new dimension to literature. Scoffers call her writing a mad jumble of words, and some of them suspect that she is having a sardonic joke at the expense of those who profess to believe in her.

… It is not clear whether ‘Tender’ of the title means a row boat, a fuel car attached to a locomotive or is an expression of human emotions…[[76]](#footnote-76)

The excerpt above reported is a good example of the kind of reaction Gertrude Stein’s work has continued to provoke. The choice of expressions and the overall tone suggest a reaction dictated by an instinct for self-defense in the face of a sensory challenge articulated at the level of language (‘gyrations’, technological shock). Leo Stein himself, who once asserted that she was ‘not an intelligent thinker’[[77]](#footnote-77), had some difficulties in trying to come to term with her sister’s writings, thus causing the first of the series of misunderstandings that brought eventually to the definitive break-up in their relationship:

Gertrude…hungers and thirsts for glory, and it was of course a serious thing for her that I can’t abide her stuff and think it abominable. This would not have been so bad if there had been any general recognition without; a prophet can support not being honored in his own country when other lands sufficiently acclaim him, but when the acclamation otherwhere is faint the absence of support at home is painful. To this has been added my utter refusal to accept the later phases of Picasso with whose tendency Gertrude has so closely allied herself.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Henri Matisse, Georges Braque and Tristan Tzara were some of the contributors who in *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, a supplement published by *transition* (July 1935) testified to the superficiality and manipulation of the truth in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. In 1936 the Marxist critic Michael Gold called her a ‘literary idiot’. Ben Reid’s *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein* was written in 1958, and for all the scholarly attention devoted to Stein in the intervening half century remains a good example of a frustration typical of many readers, both academic and lay:

It seems to me that Miss Stein is a vulgar genius talking to herself, and if she is talking to herself, she is not an artist. It is because she does talk to herself that she offers insuperable difficulties to both reader and critic. I suggest, therefore, that she be defined out of existence as an artist. To be an artist, she must talk to us, not to the dullest or the most tradition bound or the most unsympathetic of us, but to those of us who are flexible, those willing to be fruitfully led. There is not world enough or time enough for Gertrude Stein’s kind of writing; too much in literature is both excellent and knowable.[[79]](#footnote-79)

It is impossible to ignore the sense of anger, here a mixed feeling of exclusion and frustration for not being able, or rather for not having obtained from Stein the instruments necessary to decipher her writings. The question ‘Stein’ is eventually dismissed with an assertion astonishing for its superficiality and naivety: as it would take too much time to understand, then it would be much better for Stein’s work to be ignored.

Another common response, testifying to the power of her style, was parody. Examples can be found in a number of passages in Hemingway’ s work and in the review of Stein’ s novel *Ida* by W. H. Auden which appeared in the *Sunday Review* for 22 February 1941. Stein’s extraordinary personality and the fact that she never made a mystery of her desire to be recognized as a ‘genius’ certainly complicate the task of the student who strives to achieve an objective critical position about her writings.

Being the object of either blind admiration or stubborn resentment, her critical reputation has always been biased by the reactions she provoked as a person rather than as a writer.[[80]](#footnote-80)

As a result, the vast majority of the critics inevitably fall into two equal and opposite factions, with the first trying to denigrate her figure and work (Reid, Richard Aldington, Hilary Corke), and the second (Donald Sutherland, W .G Rogers) eager to prove her (once again) among the greatest authors of the century.

While it is not my aim to provide a detailed review of Stein’s critics, it is useful to focus on the consequences of this partisan critical attitude.[[81]](#footnote-81) It is probably due to the total lack of referential material on Stein’s writing that critics have always held *Tender Buttons* closeness to Cubism as the main key to its reading, and they do so relying not only on Stein’ s patronage of Cubism and of Picasso, an aspect of her life certainly more widely known than her role as a writer, but on Stein’s own declarations. In *Picasso* (1938) she said that she alone could understand the Spanish painter because she was doing the same thing in literature. She gave three reasons for the emergence of the cubistic vision:

First. The composition, because the way of living had changed the composition of living had extended and each thing was as important as any other thing. Secondly, the faith in what the eyes were seeing, that is to say the belief in the reality of science, commenced to diminish…

Thirdly, the framing of life, the need that a picture exist in its frame, remain in its frame was over…[[82]](#footnote-82)

It seems clear from this that in her own view Stein’s artistic development in her early style mirrors the path being followed in the same years by cubism. John Golding writes that by 1909 ‘Picasso and Braque had initiated the first phase of cubism’, the stage in which

The whole picture surface is brought to life by the interaction of the shaded, angular planes. Some of these planes seem to recede away from the eye into shallow depth, but this sensation is always counteracted by a succeeding passage which will lead the eye forward again up on to the picture plane. The optical sensation produced is comparable to that of running one’s hand over an immensely elaborate, subtly carved sculpture in low relief. [[83]](#footnote-83)

During this stage of Cubism, which is usually referred to as *analytic*, Picasso composed the *Portrait of D.H Kahnwailer*, and the *Portrait of Wilhelm Uhde*, works in which the representational component is still present although a certain difficulty in their ‘reading’ has to be considered. At the same time Stein was engaged in the writing of her portraits, most notably *Matisse* and *Picasso*, and was finishing *The Making of Americans.* The portraits main features are repeated clauses, extended syntax, a very limited vocabulary and a style that, like that of analytic Cubism, can be referred to as underlyingly mimetic:

Both Picasso and Stein in their pre-1912 work, present the fleeting, fragmentary nature of perception, and represent the integrity of the individual moment of perception before consolidation by memory into a conceptual whole. In Stein’s first type of obscurity and in Picasso’s analytic phase, constriction of vocabulary, verbal or pictorial, increases obscurity. In both a barely perceptible presence lies behind a translucent surface of lines or words.[[84]](#footnote-84)

With Picasso’s collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* the synthetic phase of Cubism began. In this second stage cubists used pictorial elements such color and texture with much more variety and richness.[[85]](#footnote-85) Simultaneously, Gertrude Stein too developed a new style, the style she adopted in the composition of *Tender Buttons*. Vocabulary is extended and sentences are fragmented. Words have completely lost their mimetic qualities to leave space to their plastic qualities:

At this time, apparently, both Stein and the cubists fully realized that signifying elements could be used much more arbitrarily than in the past to produce an independent object that was no longer basically mimetic. For both Stein and Picasso, with this realization came the production of more still lifes, more attention to signifying elements for their own sake, and a playful lyricism.[[86]](#footnote-86)

This brief synopsis finds its logical conclusion in Randa Dubnick’s synthesis of the affinity between Cubism and Stein :

Even though words and pictures are quite different entities, the operations of selection and combination are used similarly in the parallel styles of Stein’s writing and cubist painting. The similarity between Stein’s writing and cubist painting seems based on common emphases on certain operations of signification over others. So structuralist theories indicate that Stein’s attempts to emulate cubism *are* appropriate to literature because they concern the very nature of language.[[87]](#footnote-87)

But such a complex work as *Tender Buttons* cannot be reduced to a stylistic attempt to mimic in literature what had been already achieved by Cubists. And on the other hand, as convenient as it might be, as Hoffmann maintains ‘the critic’s job is not to look for the exact ways in which Stein’s techniques correspond to those of Cubist painting’.[[88]](#footnote-88)

While little doubt exists therefore, about *Tender Buttons’* cubist character, few critics have been willing to follow up Stein’s critical suggestions and move beyond the equation *Tender Button***=***Cubism*. Because of the static view of art implicit in this equation, the issue of movement has been one of the most neglected aspects of *Tender Buttons*,making it difficult for example to read her subsequent passage to *The Making of Americans*, where she first experimentedwith the potentialities of the cinema technique, and then to the plays, where the actors’ performance was reduced to pure movement. *Tender Buttons*, I would suggest, can be regarded as the literary place in which Gertrude Stein, bearing in mind the possibilities offered by the newly born cinematic apparatus and especially its power to break down movement into frames and to reconstitute it, utilized objects as pretexts aiming to trigger the visual perceptive process in her mind, with the final purpose of analyzing it in detail. If I am right, then the poems in *Tender Buttons,* should be compared, rather than to still lifes, to Marey’s chronophotographs.

Of course, I do not mean to convince the reader that there is a ‘right’ way to read such a complex and challenging work; Gertrude Stein consciously did not provide her readers with any sort of interpretative clue, and the extremely complex and articulated nature of *Tender Buttons* seems to allow some basis in many of the attempts made to decode it. It would be therefore impossible to try and get a comprehensive view of *Tender Buttons*’s‘meaning’ without taking into due consideration the critical tradition. For this reason, my purpose will not be not so much to support specific readings as to add to the overall view an element that, because of its overt challenge to the widely accepted association of *Tender Buttons* with Cubism, may prove useful in understanding not so much what the text ‘means’, but just as important, what is it doing.

***Tender Buttons***

the difficulty that the artist feels and which sends him to painting still lifes, that after all the human being essentially is not paintable… No, she stayed with her task [describing people] although after her return to Paris she described objects, she described rooms and objects, which joined with her first experiments done in Spain, made the volume Tender Buttons[[89]](#footnote-89)

One of the pieces of evidence used by critics to support the Cubist interpretation of *Tender Buttons*, is Stein’s choice of focusing her attention on objects belonging to the realm of everyday life. Referring to a 1912 Picasso’s *Still Life* of a violin, E.H. Gombrich noted for example, that the cubists’s habit of choosing familiar motifs was dictated by their deep awareness of the fact that those who look at the painting, an apparent jumble of disconnected forms, must know what a violin, or a guitar, or a bottle looks like in order to establish some kind of connection between the various fragments in the picture.[[90]](#footnote-90)

However for Stein, is the painter’s final realization of the impossibility of fixing on canvas the essence of a human being, movement, that brings him to paint still lives; more as a kind of makeshift solution rather than as a positive choice. To acknowledge this automatically implied that she would have never embarked on the same route herself. Nor could it have been enough for her to merely try to imitate in writing the achievements made by cubists.

It will be though worth noting that once again, as it had been the case in *The Making of Americans,* Stein conceived *Tender Buttons* while on a journey, a condition that naturally implies a higher degree of self-consciousness and awareness of an alien surrounding space. If it is true that it was a cubist habit to paint mostly very common objects, it might have been as a reaction against the proximity of a reality so different from the one she was used to, that could have caused Stein’s eye to fall on familiar objects belonging to the household as ideal subjects for her portraits. Also, clarifying the concept of ‘photographic seeing’, Susan Sontag points out that

Photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary. Photographers were supposed to do more than just see the world as it is, including its already acclaimed marvels; they were to create interest, by new visual decisions [[91]](#footnote-91)

I would suggest that Stein did not want just to give her own interpretation of how an object could be seen. She wanted to bring to the surface those non-depictable features of the objects; the sense of movement that a glittering surface suggests, the smell that a color recalls to the mind – things that normally cannot be seen, but that form the essence of that object as much as its physical components.

Of the 110 poems forming *Tender Buttons,* only 23 are longer than 10 lines, while38 are composed of one or two lines, 30 of two to five lines and 19 by six to nine lines. It is as if Stein confronted the object she wanted to depict adopting the attitude of a photographer. After having intensely observed the object, she retained her concentration until the moment seemed right to her to capture the image on paper; and when she felt the moment was right, she did it in a short time, almost as a snapshot, or a series of snapshots. Stein ‘photographs’ were taken without the aid of a mechanical device; she relied on her own visual apparatus only, on her eyes, and through her eyes she produced a kind of photography – not of the object, but of the perceptive process itself.

*Tender Buttons* is divided into three sections: Objects, Food and Rooms. Objects occupy a space outside the observer. Food is bound to become part of the observer herself. Rooms are portions of space containing objects, food and obviously, the observer. It is apparent then, that, in Stein’s mind the physical relation between herself and the thing ‘described’ played a crucial role in the creation of the poems themselves (but the object, I would suggest was nothing but a pretext, a means to trigger the visual process). The three-part structure can be conceived as a set of Russian dolls; this and the image of water echoing in the first and last lines, are some of the elements that make *Tender Buttons* something similar to a closed-circuit system, in which the lyric matter flows, incidentally moulding its shape, but never changing its substance. For in *Tender Buttons* there is no progress or order at all. The extremely reduced length of the vast majority of the poems and the fact that each one of them constitutes a whole independent reality, discourages an ‘ordered’ reading, instead tempting the reader to a frantic jumping from one poem to another in a way that seems to mimic the ordering of commodities in modern society. Rather than being pieces of poetry these compositions seem more real and concrete than the objects they are supposed to portray. Whether we see them as goods displayed on the shelves of a store, candies in a bowl, or pearls randomly scattered on a velvet carpet, the poems in *Tender Buttons* make us want to possess them rather than to understand them. My suggetsion is that consequently, the best attitude for the reader of such poems should not be that of a detective or an archeologist, struggling to extort the truth from bits and pieces of information, but rather that of a child silently marveling at the transparent, smooth surface of a marble. In other words, one should be struck by their beauty rather than puzzled about their utility.

My analysis of *Tender Buttons* will begin with the first and the last poems, assuming that they carry a particularly intense authorial attention:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

The possible interpretations are, at the outset, manifold; as if the words were soft clay waiting to be shaped to a meaning by the critic’s expert hands. To resist the temptation to manipulate those lexical clues is not easy, and it is almost impossible, once one surrenders to it, not to be carried away by the spectrum of hues that each word carries within itself.[[92]](#footnote-92) Commentators have rarely managed to restrain their impulse to see hidden meanings in the volume’s lexical components. And yet, Stein in her lecture *Poetry and Grammar* is quite explicit about her way of dealing with words in this text:

As I say a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing that you do not call it by the name by which it is known. Everybody knows that by the way they do when they are in love and a writer should always have that intensity of emotion about whatever is the object about which he writes

And then

Think what you do when you do do that when you love the name of anything really love its name. Inevitably you express yourself in that way, in the way poetry express itself that is in short lines in repeating what you began in order to do it again. Think of how you talk to anything whose name is new to you a lover a baby or a dog or a new land or any part of it….Think about it and you will see what I mean by what you feel.

So I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything.

Finally,

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun…Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns.[[93]](#footnote-93)

The three passages clearly state Stein’s attitude both toward the physical world and toward words, the means she used to portray it. During her stay in Granada she fell in love with the world of things and, as it always happens when one falls in love, she had the feeling of witnessing a unique and unrepeatable experience, as if the act of creation of both the object of her love and her feeling toward it was taking place before her eyes, as if for the first time in the history of humanity. Most people experience once in their life the need to coin a special name for the beloved, not to call ‘by the name by which he is known’. And it is that sort of urge that impels *Tender Buttons*:

…I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything’s name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new…

I commenced trying to do something in *Tender Buttons* about this thing. I went on and on trying to do this thing. I remember in writing *An Acquaintance with Description* looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written.[[94]](#footnote-94)

That ‘something that was not the name of the thing but was in a way the actual thing’ came to form the poems themselves, and as Stein thought that ‘that is what poetry is it is a state of knowing and feeling a name’ what one should expect to find in them has not only to do with the object but also and more importantly, with the feeling that it stirred, in other words, with the perceptive process it triggered. There are no drafts left as witness to the actual process of Stein’s creation, but the line just reported seems to back up my hunch that a prolonged period of observation of the object was followed, as in photographs, by an extremely quick fixing of it on paper: ‘I remember […] looking at anything until something that was […] that actual thing would come to be written’.

The titles of *Tender Buttons* are constituted by one simple word: the name of the object portrayed. But the first poem of the *Objects* section is an exception.[[95]](#footnote-95) In the title appear not one, but two substantives: ‘carafe’, the object being portrayed, and ‘glass’. The two names are connected by means of the relative pronoun ‘that’, bearing an explicative function. The title also displays the adjective ‘blind’, a disturbing choice with which to inaugurate a series of portraits. In my view, the key points in ‘A carafe, that is blind glass’ are the words ‘spectacle’, ‘hurt color’ and the last sentence ‘The difference is spreading’. Both ‘spectacle’ and ‘hurt color’ are expressions denoting emotional hues: amazement in the first case, pain in the latter. It is not forcing a meaning upon these expressions to claim that the ability to let ordinary things stroke her formed the *conditio sine qua non* of Stein conceiving such a work. As she admitted, the compositional process was a struggle.

Finally, the puzzling declaration that ‘the difference is spreading’, suggesting both fragmentation and, because of the present continuous form, movement. There is a sense of some sort of uncontrollable chain reaction going on, and the author seemingly wants her audience to be aware of it through the whole reading. There is no way to know if this ‘difference’ refers to the technological, scientific and psychological changes affecting her era, or rather to the Jamesian view of the world as a uniform reality composed by objects whose differences were not inherent but a creation of human perceptions. Once again, the most sensible attitude toward *Tender Buttons* is not to choose one among the possible options but to accept its multiform nature.

‘This is the dress, Aider’ is the last poem of thefirst section. Whilst assonance and the role played by sound in general are elements omnipresent in *Tender Buttons*’s poems, I would argue that the phonematic component should be here regarded as the most notable feature. It is as if as a result of a crescendo, in this poem the process of emptying words of any sort of lexical content reaches its acme as words surrender to sounds:

Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.

A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Whilst this poem lacks any reference to the act of seeing, words related to the world of senses and physiological functions such as ‘touch’, ‘munch’ and the quite immediate pun ‘a to let’ ease the reader towards the following section, ‘Food’.

The last section of *Tender Buttons* ‘Rooms’ is a long single poem. It is here that Stein focused closely on the issue of movement. Rooms, after all, are those portions of space in which human beings live and therefore, move; movies areprojected in dark rooms and it is of course in darkrooms that film developing takes place. These the opening words of *Rooms*: ‘Act so that there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width’.[[97]](#footnote-97) ‘Action’ has been given a particular importance here by being repeated twice; pure action, without specific purpose but that of eliminating the need to identify a ‘centre’. Just as Marey’s overlapping images could make sense and justify their existence only if read continuously by the eye of the observer, so Stein hints at the way her poems should be read, each word making sense by itself, but finding its more profound and complete meaning when part of a whole composition. She proceeds by juxtaposing the adjective ‘wide’ with the noun ‘width’ explaining that there is a difference between the two, and implicitly warning the reader against the temptation to entrust anything else but one’s own perception with the task of understanding reality.

References to movement, speed, change or time, concentrate particularly in the lines following the one just cited. It is also interesting that Stein uses a verb that appears in the first poem of *Tender Buttons*, ‘to spread’:

So the tune which is there has a little piece to play, and the exercise is all there is of a fast. Then tender and true makes no width to hew is the time that there is no question to adopt… There is no change lighter… And then the spreading, that was not accomplishing that needed standing and yet the time was not so difficult as they were not all in place. They had no change… It was spread there. Any change was in the ends of the centre. A heap was heavy. There was no change.

Words relating directly to movement gradually disappear in the course of this last poem, giving way to what looks like a literary collage formed by short paragraphs ‘portraying’ objects, whose echoing of the poems in the first section confirm in my view Stein’s will to create a ‘closed-circuit’ book’, a book whose subject matter flows continuously and harmoniously through its sentences, like water through the pipes of a fountain. Stein in the end did not need to keep on stressing movement by naming it; *Tender Buttons*’s very existence was a celebration of it.

One should not be surprised to note that water, although never considered explicitly, appears in the first and last sentence of *Tender Buttons*: ‘The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain.’[[98]](#footnote-98) Water and movement share common features. They are both shapeless and in order to be seen or studied or used, they need to be contained by some sort of receptacle. They both have a double nature: potentially disruptive forces in themselves, they are nonetheless responsible for life on earth. It is impossible to say where movement and water begin and where they end. To quote Stein in ‘Rooms’, one is tempted to say that they are ‘A whole center’.

**A Table**

A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it means it does that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake.[[99]](#footnote-99)

As I suggested, many interpretive paradigms have been applied to *Tender Buttons* in order to unravel its hidden meaning. My approach differs from most in considering *Tender Buttons* not as a sort of lexical treasure hunt, all riddles and puns pointing at a cloudy ‘something else’, but instead as *the* ‘something else’, its form and substance constituting a perfect self-explanatory wholeness that speculations and suppositions can on the long run, only pollute.

It is driven by this belief and by the desire to let the text speak for itself that I have tried to deal with it adopting what seemed to be the most empirical approach possible, i.e. a simple chart of its basic particles, a table listing the poem’s substantive words (this is presented as Appendix I)*.* I have focused on four semantic fields: the realms of visual perception, sounds, feelings and kinetic activity. Once I set the criteria, filling in the table proved to relatively easy. Once the chart was complete, and even during its construction, I was of course aware of the dangers of the schematic. But as will also become clear, the chart does have a utility in bringing to light some lexical patterns whose behavior could hardly be labeled as casual, and which therefore demanded attention.

Here follows an analysis of the table (Appendix I), which I hope will leave no doubts about the preeminence of the issue of movement in *Tender Buttons.* The first column gathers the words related to the visual field. The only one presenting an extremely stable pattern, this column represents a unicum in the table. This observation should not cause any surprise, for although the quest for the real subject matter in *Tender Buttons* may still be under way, the piece itself is indisputably a descriptive one, and as such, has its roots in the visual sphere. Colors as one could expect predominate. Alongside solid colors, Stein uses more sophisticated hues such as ‘rose-wood color’, ‘dust color’ or ‘straw color’, creating an elaborate chromatic vocabulary. Other features in the same column are verbs describing visual actions as ‘looking’, ‘see’, ‘spy’ or ‘stare’, and nouns as ‘eye sight’, ‘specs’, ‘eye’, ‘image’ or ‘spark’.

The subject matter of the second column is emotions. Two considerations persuaded me to include this subject. Firstly, I wanted to emphasize the emotional component present in Stein’s creative process, whose neglect has often resulted in a perception of Stein’s project as a self-sufficient mental lucubration. A glance at the list is sufficient to realize how far this is from the truth. Words expressing emotions populate the lines in *Tender Buttons* and among them terms indicating pain predominate. This emphasis on suffering represents an ideal platform for speculation; but instead of giving in to the temptation of trying to find an explanation for it, I would rather once more trust Stein’s words, citing a passage from *Lectures in America* as an insight into the creative process and emotions involved:

Language as a real thing is not imitation either of sounds or colors or emotions it is an intellectual re-creation… I struggled I struggled desperately with the recreation and the avoidance of nouns as nouns.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Secondly, I hoped that an analysis of the frequency with which emotion-related words occurred in the text would enable me to pinpoint the main stages of the ongoing creative process. It did help with that. The layout of the table enabled me to observe for example, that from poem 70 on, terms related to emotions, which can be found regularly from the first poem, disappear.[[101]](#footnote-101) Even more interestingly, the clear layout of the table allowed me to notice how column 2 is not the only one at that point in the text to abruptly shift its pattern: musical and kinetic terms also vanish. Inevitably, I started asking myself if what I was noticing was a mere coincidence or the sign of a carefully planned change of register. It was the sudden absence of the musical component, which puzzled me most. Marianne De Koven points out that Stein’s experiments on language also explored ‘the possibilities of writing as a form of music’.[[102]](#footnote-102) So how was it possible that in a work that Stein always considered as one of her most important, one of the fundamental elements of her style could be suddenly abandoned? The answer is very simple: it was not, it was simply disguised. In the first section ‘Objects’ and in the first half of the second section ‘Food’, music, or rather sounds, are evoked via the recurrence of words as ‘singing’, ‘melody’, ‘crackle’. From poem number 70 on, such direct references to the acoustic field are scarcely to be found, but it is precisely then that music, or melody, by not being named anymore, becomes a whole with the text:

CELERY (n.82)

Celery tastes tastes where in curled lashes and little bits and mostly in remains. A green acre is so selfish and so pure and so enlivened.

CHICKEN (n. 90)

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in.

CREAM (n. 95)

Cream cut. Any where crumb. Left hop chambers.[[103]](#footnote-103)

Without even a trace left of that visually evocative language typical of the first section, where a meaning, although multivalent and volatile, could be somehow forced onto words, the reader is challenged to abandon his natural instinct to ‘understand’ and is instead expected to ‘feel’. From poem n.70 on, words become more and more abstract, nouns rarer and rarer; verbs instead, especially dynamic ones, rise and so do adverbs and conjunctions. Like a blind person, the reader has to learn to read again, renouncing all the landmarks he had relied on all his life, and let himself be guided by sounds instead. And if words cannot be understood/seen anymore, then they can be ‘felt’, or heard.

About portrait writing, Stein commented: ‘I must find out what is moving inside them that makes them them, and I must find out how I by the thing moving excitedly inside in me can make a portrait of them.’[[104]](#footnote-104) She also claimed that *Tender Buttons* was the product of both the impressions that the object she had been observing stirred in her, and of her personal, unique experience of that particular object. This process was what she called the fusion of ‘the outside and the inside’. This considered, the simultaneous eradication from *Tender Buttons* of such icons of inner and outer reality that feelings and sounds are, takes on a profound meaning. The citation above suggests that the link between the outer and the inner world was ‘what was moving inside’ the objects and inside herself: it was through that ‘something moving inside’ that she could recognize, and consequently portray. This is not the place to investigate the nature of such a cohesive power; what is relevant instead, is to stress that the word she chose to describe that power is *‘movement’*. Movement, Stein believed, was the essence of all things and something that would have tantalized painters of all schools and most ages. But for writers, things were different. In the excellent essay *‘*Looking at pictures and looking at things’, Kendall L. Walton attempts to explain how depiction differs from description.[[105]](#footnote-105) One of the points he makes is that if in viewing a painting it is impossible to mistake a horse with a house, that mistake can occur while reading a book, because of the visual similarity between the two words. Walton therefore concludes that words block our understanding of the world they intend to describe, while paintings do not.

This line of reasoning loses its validity when instead of an object, the subject of the painting is an abstract concept. Pure movement for example. The picture of a drifting cloud, of a kite, or of leaves whirling, are only means through which the observer infers the presence of movement in the painting. But what his retina records is a still image. The process of reading is different. Whenever an object is mentioned in a text, *automatically* the reader transfers on that object his own unique experience of it; the shape of the cloud, or the color of the kite, if not specified by the author, changes according the reader’s mood and experience. If in the scene described a mill is mentioned, it is extremely likely that a sense of movement will be superimposed by the reader on the word ‘mill’. The mill in the text therefore, is never a motionless one that only thanks to a further mental elaboration will be forced into motion. The reader, in other words, never ‘sees’ a motionless mill.

Stein knew of the evocative power of words and if in the ‘Food’ and ‘Object’ sections she only *suggested* the impression of movement, in the third and final section, ‘Rooms’, Stein moves a step forward and *tells* movement itself, not its description*.* From observing the table one can immediately see how in this closing section words indicating movement increase enormously. But this is not the only characteristic that makes ‘Rooms’ different from the previous two. Under a purely visual perspective for example, the absence of subtitles is glaring: instead of a series of brief poems, ‘Rooms’ is a long whole piece with no interruptions at all. Far from being the product of a whimsical mind, this radical change in the composition promotes the structure of the text, from being a mere stylistic device to being an integral part of *Tender Buttons*. If it is true that it is here, in this last poem, that movement, constantly recurring in the words of the text, finally becomes the overt subject matter, then, the elimination of barriers to the reader’s stream of thought (such as titles) discloses an attempt to mould the poem’s form to its content. And it is precisely the content, or even better, the way in which the content is expressed, to constitute another peculiarity of this last section.

The opening line of ‘Rooms’ has the zest of a manifesto: ‘Act so that there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width.’[[106]](#footnote-106) The subject matter is finally overtly stated, and as a consequence from that first line on, it will be explicitly mentioned (‘act’, ‘action’, ‘motion’, ‘movement’, ‘moving’). Images or metaphors are instead rarely used and when they are (‘spread’, ‘growth’, ‘stream’), they express a sense of ‘flow’. Among them, I found the words ‘rain’ and ‘fountain’ particularly interesting. Neither of these images had been previously used in *Tender Buttons* and this singularity somehow enhances their ability to convey a sense of continuous movement.

In addition to the elimination of subtitles and the resort to certain images, the sense of flow is also given by the massive presence of verbs declined in the -ing form. In order to avoid confusion, the table lists only the ones directly referring to movement (‘going’), but even those which do not (‘washing’), retain a feeling of immediacy vital to the success of *Tender Buttons* in giving the reader the illusion that whatever it is going on in the text, it is happening right in front of his eyes. As in a perfect engine, the kinetic energy created by *Tender Buttons*’ lexical components is canalized by the completely attrition-free ‘Room’ structure. As a turbine, the last word ‘fountain’ directs the words’ flow beyond the last verse of the poem and toward its very first word ‘carafe’. The circuit is closed, but it keeps on flowing.

**Conclusions**

From the early fascination with paintings to the composition of *Tender Buttons*, passing through the years at Radcliffe College and *The Making of Americans* the issue of movement had been a constant in Stein’s private and artistic life. Already coupled to an insatiable desire to learn and a natural penchant for challenges, Stein’s creative genius found in that ‘movement focused’ historic era that was the early twentieth century a perfect environment.

An attentive observer of the everyday, Stein did not leave the small wonders of the world pass unnoticed. The way people talked, the way they moved, the sound of their laughter, nothing was left uncharted. The elaboration of the notion of insistence as opposed to repetition, following her acquaintance with the ‘lively aunts’ of Baltimore is an example of an attitude that could have hardly be missed by an experienced and passionate teacher as William James. It was thanks to a set of experiments conducted under his supervision that Stein’s inborn interest in human nature coalesced with the issue of movement. Stein and her subject kept their hands on a planchette that was suspended from a ceiling. Stein started moving the planchette in a certain way and after a few moments would change it, in order to verify whether the subject instinctively resisted the change, and therefore had subconsciously learned the movement, or not. Movement then, both vehicle of a consciously imparted information and signal of the subjects’ subconscious response to it, was the visible proof of a cognitive experience in progress; in other words, of life. The inner and the outer world were clearly manifesting themselves, mirroring each other, showing their complementary nature and the means by which this epiphany was taking place was nothing else but movement. A few years later, when she wrote that she wanted to know what was that something that moving inside of everything made of a certain thing *that* thing and not another one, I believe she did so with the Radcliffe experiment in mind.

The beginning of the century saw the development of new visual technologies and with them, the illusion of being able to store time. Once on film, images could be rescued from the incessant flowing of events and seen again and again. Every movement captured by the camera could be now scrutinized and its secrets revealed. In the early 1870s Etienne Jules Marey had invented chronophotography, a technique that allowed one to study in great detail the successive spatial positions of the subject photographed, its overlapping images giving the observer no sense of ‘before’ or ‘after’ at all. My suggestion was that Stein’s continuous present, eliminating barriers between the past and the future and breaking down actions into ‘frames’, was the literary equivalent to chronophotography. Stein declared on different occasions her intention to recreate in literature what the cinema was doing, explaining that thanks to the images constantly moving on the screen, cinema had finally solved the dilemma of memory in relation to the existence of a prolonged present. Memory, always looking back at the past was an intrinsic obstacle to the creation of a single temporal dimension where past and future did not exist, but the constant flow of images the spectator was exposed to had the power to make him perform subconsciously a synthesis of hundreds of shots that his mind had recorded without him being aware of.

Another feature photography and Stein had in common, I suggested was the way they both needed concentration and focus on the chosen object before depicting it and the immediacy of the ‘snapshot’ that followed. *Tender Buttons* I maintained, is the literary place where Stein, after having explored the possibility of the continuous present in *The Making of Americans*, fully aware of the various different moment in which the perceptive process takes place, uses the objects observed as a pretext to trigger the perceptive process itself with the final aim of analyzing it and the repercussions it provokes on the human mind. I hope I have managed to made it clear that because the lack of references in the text and the volatility of the subject matter itself (and critics have failed to agree on this fundamental point as well as on many other) whoever approaches *Tender Buttons* needs to do so with an open mind, resisting the temptation to either force a preconceived meaning on it or to label it pure nonsense, and instead letting the text speak for itself.

Charting the semantic components in the textopened the possibility of analytically concentrating on *Tender Buttons*. Words here are much more than vessels delivering to the reader the author’s thoughts. They *are* the thoughts. Gertrude Stein defined as a genius the person who was able to talk and listen at the same time, just as the motor goes on in the car and the car moving, a whole action. I think that in a way this is what happens in *Tender* Buttons: Stein is at the same time both perceiving the objects she describes and reflecting upon the undergoing process of perception. The smallest unity of language has been carefully chosen and its appearance in the text long pondered, and the reader cannot afford to start enjoying such a text unless he is not prepared to pay to every single word the due amount of attention. Using a table to examine the distribution of language in Stein’s poems, this task is rendered easier. Removing words from context and dividing them in semantic fields means being able to analyse Stein’s stream of thoughts, her attention to colors, her focus on pain, and all the table suggested the fundamental role assigned to movement in *Tender Buttons*. Whether intended as that quid lingering inside every living creature that makes them what they are, or as pure motive power, movement that can only be seen or said but never portrayed, is *Tender Buttons*’ real subject matter.

**Chapter 2**

Portraits: from the rhythm of the world   
to the rhythm of a human being

**Why Portraits?**

You do see, anybody can see that so much happens every day and that anybody literally anybody can read or hear about it told the day that it happens. […] You do see what that means. Novels then which tell a story are really then more of the same much more of the same and so a great many novels are written and a great many novels are read telling more of these stories but you can see you do see that the important thing written in this generation do not tell a story. You can see that it is natural enough.

You begin definitely to feel that it had to be that I was to write portraits as I wrote them.[[107]](#footnote-107)

The advent of mass communication changed the world and its perception. Reports of facts taking place in the remotest parts of the planet hit the front pages of the newspapers only hours after they happened. The joint efforts of journalists and photographers brought the Boer and First World Wars in the homes of civilians, but it was only with radio bulletins that immediacy and simultaneity, iconic elements of the new era, found their purest expression. The pages of a daily paper provided readers with an amount of information every week greater than that which their predecessors would have been able to gather in a lifetime. Professional discourse on the human expanded. A proliferation of studies investigating the human mind put the nightmarish visions of Romanticism into a new perspective, and a heightened concern with modernity itself and its disruptive influence on human beings brought to light harsh new realities. Reality was the most exciting story ever written. Nobody needed another story to be told. This is why in Stein’s words:

… in the three novels written in this generation that are the important things written in this generation, there is, in none of them a story. There is none in Proust in *The Making of Americans* or in *Ulysses*. And this is what you are now to begin to realize in this description I am giving you of making portraits.[[108]](#footnote-108)

Aware of the cultural overload posing a threat to the very existence of the novel as a genre, Stein cunningly shifts the focus of the topic so that instead of questioning the legitimacy of a novel that doesn’t tell a story anymore, she matter-of-factly asserts that, in the twentieth century, it is precisely the absence of a story that makes a novel creditable. The novel depends on an absence of remembering.

In *The Making of Americans*, Stein had thus stretched the genre of the novel to its limits. The feebleness of the plot, paired with a style aimed at paralleling the cinematographic process, in order to bypass the problem of memory, made it one of Stein’s most controversial pieces.[[109]](#footnote-109) Problems were caused not only by its content, but also and more to the point, by its form: what do we call a novel without a plot? Can we even conceive a novel without a plot? After having cast such doubts upon the form of the novel, turning back was out of the question. Stein (much to her detractors’ relief) never again attempted to write anything even remotely similar to *The Making of Americans*. Once the point had been made, once the novel had officially been pronounced dead, and as a consequence memory having been declared an obsolete tool for writing (if not an obstacle to living life fully and completely), the possibility opened out of moving toward a ground until then unexplored; toward a way of writing that in principle excluded memory. The following excerpt from *‘Portraits and Repetition’*  gives an account of that seminal moment:

When I first began writing [portraits] …I naturally began to describe them as they were doing anything. In short I wrote a story as a story, that is the way I began, and slowly I realized this confusion, a real confusion, that in writing a story one had to be remembering, and that novels are soothing because so many people one may say everybody can remember almost anything. It is this element of remembering that makes novels so soothing.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Novels are ‘soothing’ because memory grants an easy identification with the narration process. Memory forms the ground on which a cathartic process is enacted. Stein’s choice of adjective reveals her sense that the familiar emotional response novels could elicit in their readers had its roots in a need for peace, for being comforted and reassured. In knowing, that is, what one’s place was in space, in time, in history. By recognizing their own fears and misshapenness in the vicissitudes described in the novel, slipping into its surroundings and way of life, readers feel less isolated as their personal comedy/tragedy takes on universal tones. If it is true that the media and the historic and scientific developments had already delivered a fatal blow to the novel, it should also be considered that because of impulses towards social fragmentation at the beginning of the twentieth century it became increasingly difficult for readers to empathize with fictional characters within a clearly defined social context. This is the age of Dostoyevsky; of the alienated hero.

In order to achieve her goals as a writer, nothing could have served Stein less than the form of the novel. Time was the problem. In an era characterized by velocity and immediacy, an asynchronous writing was simply not tolerable for an author whose aim was to capture the ‘rhythm’ of a human being: [[111]](#footnote-111)

But and that was the thing that I was gradually finding out listening and talking at the same time that is realizing the existence of living being actually existing did not have in it any element of remembering and so *the time of existing was not the same as in the novels that were soothing.* As I say all novels are soothing because they make anything happen as they can happen that is by remembering anything. But and I kept wondering as I talked and listened all at once, I wondered is there any way of making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering. I found this very exciting. And I began to make portraits.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The urge to write what she knew without recurring to the filter of memory was, she suggests, the reason for Stein’s turning to the genre of portraits; a genre in which the role played by ‘immediacy’ could never be overrated.

### The first section of this chapter will offer an analysis of the various different phases in which Stein’s word-portraits developed, but for the moment I would like to focus on what it was that Stein was so desperate to capture during her over thirty years of portrait writing.

From the ban placed on memory naturally stems the impossibility of recurring to description, which is why Stein’s word portraits lack any referentiality. Far from attempting to reproduce in the mind of the reader the features of her ‘sitter’, Stein’s portrait tantalizes and frustrates the human eye. Stein felt very strongly that there was something inside each and every human being that made him who he was, something unique that could be considered the ‘bottom nature’. That ‘something’ had nothing to do with physical appearance, or with the way somebody moved or behaved. Stein had spent years in trying to classify every possible type of human being, but when she was well on in her project, and seeing that although extremely time demanding the task was a feasible one, she turned away from it: ‘If it’s possible, why do it?’ It was something else, something immediately recognizable, something that could not be described or rationalized but only felt, that could not be seen but only perceived; something whose existence, although nestled somewhere deep in the being of an individual, could nonetheless be immediately detected through a synthetic process performed by the five senses in a matter of an instant. This ethereal quid was what Stein strived to capture in her portraits, together with the immediacy with which it could be recognized.

In the same years Picasso not only was striving to portray people as no one had ever dared to do before, but in doing so he was adopting a philosophical approach which paralleled Stein’s. What Stein liked about his technique was the lack of progress; the non-descriptive nature of his work, its immediacy. A portrait by Picasso can be considered – in terms of Stein’s own account of it – immediate in two ways. On the compositional side, there is no mediation between the eye that sees and the hand that draws; on the purely perceptive side it has the immediacy typical of every visual image, the first and the last brush stroke coexisting on the same canvas, brought simultaneously to life by the observer’s eyes (there is no mediation between reality as it is and the reality as it appears). When we look at his famous one-eyed human faces, the first feeling is one of estrangement and uneasiness. There is something ancestral and unsettling about them, almost menacing. Then, inevitably, the human instinct to conquer the unknown prevails and the decoding process starts. Picasso struggled ‘to express the thing as he was seeing it’[[113]](#footnote-113), to paint the images that his eyes conveyed to his brain the moment before memory started filtering, re-elaborating, decoding, and reconstructing the images. Like the graffiti on a cave’s wall, Picasso’s drawings freeze in time a moment of the perceptive process that would be otherwise lost and with which we all are well acquainted. So well acquainted in fact, that promptly recognizing at some subconscious level the ‘incompleteness’ of the process enacted, one feels almost compelled to complete with one’s own interpretation Picasso’s ‘interrupted’ perceptive process, almost as if we were unable to enjoy what we cannot understand.

And this is one of the points Stein was trying to make in her Portraits. As human beings, we are trapped in a contradiction which we have the duty to free ourselves from. This contradiction, the contradiction between finite and infinite, lies in the fact that ‘you live on this earth and you cannot get away from it and yet there is a space where the stars are which is unlimited and that contradiction is there in every man and every woman and so nothing is ever settled.’[[114]](#footnote-114) Human beings are forever haunted by the duality inherent in their mortal condition: knowledge is infinite, but man’s life is not. The modern era with its flood of stimuli, with all its beginnings and endings, and with its mass deaths in war, compromised irreversibly the peculiar human condition of being aware of one’s own mortality and be able to live ignoring that awareness. Humanity was now forced to come to term with its own caducity without the benefit or the consolation of those religious credos and scientific beliefs to which so many had turned in previous eras. (‘Being men is a very difficult thing to be’.[[115]](#footnote-115))

## The ethical implication of this perception is that, torn between reassuring memories of the past and the hopes or fears concealed in the future, the only chance for men to be able to experience life is to live fully as possible in the present. Stein knew that most people were unable to try to solve this dilemma and preferred more or less consciously to ignore it (perhaps aided by the new forms of appealing estrangement offered by the modernity: alienation, drugs and alcohol). For Stein genius consisted in facing this challenge, trying to disengage themselves from the contradiction by learning to live in the present, fully and completely: ‘… you have to be a genius to live in it and to exist in it and express it to accept it and deny it by creating it…’[[116]](#footnote-116)

Life was a mystery whose main feature was continuous flow; it could not be solved or understood in narrative terms. In ‘Portraits and Repetition’ Stein says that at the beginning of her portrait–writing, she had started describing people ‘as they were doing anything’. She soon realized that in so doing she was writing ‘a story as a story’ and that ‘in writing a story one had to be remembering’. *‘I wondered, is it there any way of making what I know come out as I know it, come out as not remembering*’.[[117]](#footnote-117)Remembering was not acceptable in the portrait-writing process or else there would not have been any difference between a novel and a word-portrait. More importantly, turning to description would have jeopardized Stein’s aim to preserve and transmit in her portrait the ‘wholeness’ and uniqueness of every human being: the physical and character features as well as the incidental circumstances or environments that shaped an individual’s reality. It was such togetherness of ‘outsides’ and ‘insides’, that bundle of hundreds of different thoughts and emotions eventually concentrating in one single feeling of ‘acquaintance’ that Stein aimed at capturing. To achieve this, she had to undergo a kind of *kenosis* or self-emptying:

… this is what I did when I made portraits of every one I know. I said what I knew as they said and heard what they heard and said until I had completely emptied myself of all they were…[[118]](#footnote-118)

The process of portraying objects had been a simpler one: there was only one ‘reality’ to be accounted for; the observer’s. There was no interaction involved, no need to talk or listen; just looking. In composing portraits of ‘every one she knew’ Stein writes that ‘I was gradually finding out listening and talking at the same time that […] the existence of living being actually existing did not have in it any element of remembering.’[[119]](#footnote-119) If we agree to adopt the metaphor of the river of life, we could say that while writing *Tender Buttons* Stein was sitting along that river, observing the objects carried along by its currents; but in her portrait-writing, she jumps in that river and lets herself be dragged along, seeking a resistance realized in time rather than contemplation. As she commented ‘The strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something.’[[120]](#footnote-120) Even though at first there was a feeling of no movement at all, soon the realization comes that there is a movement there, it was the flow’s movement; but also, there was herself moving in it and being moved by it, now part of the flow itself. In the act of living fully in the present, the two movements, or rhythms, external and the internal, become one:

One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius […] like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The technological metaphor is of interest here: it signals a technics of writing which seeks to align itself with modernity while also saving the notion of genius.

The harmonic combination of the two movements is different for each and every human being and is attainable only through the continuous present: the artificial coupling of writing and living which Stein struggled to create in her writing. Always being conscious that by creating it, she was also threatened with falling into representation: it is no mystery that Stein’s experience as a writer was never a tranquil, effortless one. But I would suggest that because of her lucid awareness in trying to capture, through the act of writing, something so volatile as the continuous present, she was also reifying (by extrapolating) the flow of time. For this reasons the Portraits can leave in the mouth of the reader a bitter aftertaste. If in *Tender Buttons* the reader could (in a way) ‘sit back and relax’, marveling at a kaleidoscopic lexical spectacle, with the Portraits that detachment cannot exist because of the collision of selves involved; for example in the voyeuristic expectations raised by the subject matter itself, made explicit in the titles: *Matisse, Picasso, Bernard Fay, A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson*, etc.Expectations barely survive the lines that follow such titles. The reader is left with a sense of bafflement mixed with a vague feeling of uneasiness, akin to that one experiences in struggling to recognize the features of a long-lost friend.[[122]](#footnote-122)

By consciously plunging herself into the flow of existence Stein renounced the possibility of an even vaguely referential approach to portrait writing (i.e. the one adopted in *Tender Buttons*, where references to the visual world are always present). By positioning herself in the flow, she ruled out the possibility of distancing herself from it, and therefore a description of the flow itself or of the various elements constituting its essence (human beings) was precluded; all she could do was to attempt an investigation on the nature of the movement resulting from the synthesis of inner (unique to every individual) and outer (immutable and common to every human being) flow. That movement, that flow was the essence of every human being, and Stein called it ‘rhythm’.[[123]](#footnote-123) Through her portraits she set herself on a mission to investigate the nature of that ‘rhythm’. Whether or not she succeeded will be considered later on in this chapter, but now that we have defined what was it that she wanted to achieve through the Portraits, let us try to understand why an iconoclastic author decided to convey her message via the most traditional and specific pictorial genre. In order to answer this question we have to try to understand what a portrait is and what happens to the portrait in the early twentieth century.

‘A painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders’. This is the definition given in the Oxford Dictionary. Both a painting and a portrait are static, but the attitude of the painter in relation to the issue of movement while creating them could not be more different. In the process of painting a landscape, or a particular historical moment, the artist’s main concern is either to convey the kinetic power sweeping through the scene, or on the contrary to single out from the action a particular feature in order to make it eternal. In portraying instead, movement is hardly an issue. The perfect sitter is the one who can bear to stand still as long as possible, allowing the eye of the artist to penetrate the surface of his/her physical appearance and catch a glimpse of the sitter’s real nature. After all, the word ‘sitter’ itself, and the fact that generally his or her lower part of the body does not appear in the portrait suggests the *absence of motion* as being an inherent characteristic of portrait painting. Of course the face is the most recognizable feature of a human body, but also, ignoring legs and feet serves the painter’s twofold need to avoid hinting both at the sitter’s earthly existence and at the idea of movement, that is of change. In so doing the portrait achieves its real ultimate goal: the arousal in the observer of a sense of emulation.

In 1845 Lord Palmerston delivered a passionate speech to the House of Common supporting the foundation of a National Portrait Gallery:

There cannot, I feel convinced be a greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble action, to good conduct on the part of the living, than for them to see before them the features of those who have done things which are worthy of or admiration, and whose example we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits.[[124]](#footnote-124)

By setting a never changing model to look up to, the pursuit of perfection becomes more realistic. Also and more importantly, the portrait defies the barriers of time. Painted in a fixed moment, a portrait more effectively than any other rendition consigns to posterity the features of an exceptional human being and provides the attentive observer with unique clues about a past way of life. Portraits can have a special honesty, an immediacy that even the most realistic of written descriptions struggle in equaling. Despite conscious attempts to beautify both the appearances of the sitter and the surroundings, and an equally conscious selection of the elements to be included in the portrait, a painter, being contemporary to his/subject, would not be aware of the special meaning that a given feature, or object, or pose so ordinary and familiar to him will take on in two or three hundred years . Because of this immediacy and honesty, a painted portrait tends to function as an extremely reliable means toward the knowledge of a world that does not exist anymore; it awakens in the observer a sentiment of belonging and justifies his or her being in the world. Thanks to portraits the cloth of which the past is formed becomes tangible.

This was to Gertrude Stein the essence of a masterpiece, bound up with her concept of ‘being existing’. As Allegra Stewart points out:

‘The ‘be’ in become is a reminder that things persist – that there is a continuous present in which actual beings exist and sustain themselves as entities amid the flux. A masterpiece is such an entity. It carries within it its own measure of value and is therefore open to everyone who has a human mind in any conceivable here and now.[[125]](#footnote-125)

All this considered, Stein’s adoption of the form of portrait writing becomes almost self-explanatory. Concerned by the difficulty and aware of the necessity to live fully in the present, portraiture presented to her the ideal ground on which to bring into focus the genre’s original aspirations: to make the present eternal.

In the first chapter, I argued that the best way to understand the essence of *Tender Buttons* was to let the text speak for itself, hence the table charting its lemmas. The result obtained by following such a pragmatic approach encourages me to adopt a similar method here. The following analysis of Stein’s first interest with and changing of style in her Portraits will be consequently based on ‘Portraits and Repetition’, one of the lectures she delivered to the American public in 1934. By comparing the various phases of Stein’s portrait writing with the evolution of the portrait as a visual genre, I will aim to reinforce my view that Stein’s main aspiration as a writer was to incorporate and capture the essence of life (the rhythm of a human being, as she referred to it) in her art, and that during her struggle to pursue this she had always in mind the inspiring if tantalizing example of the visual arts of her era.

**Portraits and Repetition**

*‘*Portraits and Repetition’ opens with a statement:

The thing that is important is the way that portraits of men and women and children are written, by written I mean made. And by made I mean felt*.* Portraits of men and women and children are differently felt in every generation and by a generation one means any period of time. One does mean any period of time by a generation. A generation can be anywhere from two years to a hundred years. What was it that somebody said that the only thing God could not do was to make a two year old mule in a minute. But the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that *moving is existing*. [[126]](#footnote-126)

Feelings (or ‘inner’ movement), the flowing of time and the consequent changes in perception (or ‘external’ movement), and kinetic movement thus form the coordinates from which, and the tools with which Stein takes on her explorative journey into portrait writing.

The lecture continues pointing at three epiphanic moments that were crucial both to Stein’s understanding of the difference between repetition and insistence, and to the ultimate realization that where there is life there is no repetition, an understanding from which stemmed every other intuition of what a portrait should be:

I became conscious of these things[…] that the stars are worlds and that everything is moving, that is the first conscious feeling of necessary repetition […].Then the second thing is when you first realize the history of variouscivilizations, that have been on this earth, that too makes one realize repetition and at the same time the difference of insistence […]. When I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence […] was when at about seventeen years of age, I left the more or less internal and solitary and concentrated life I led in California and came to Baltimore and lived […] with a whole group of very lively little aunts […] and […] they did have to say and hear said whatever was said and any one not hearing what it was they said had to come in to hear what had been said. That inevitably made everything said often. I began then to consciously listen to what anybody was saying and what they did say while they were saying what they were saying. This was not yet the beginning of writing but it was the beginning of knowing what there was that made it be no repetition. *No matter how often what had happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition*.[[127]](#footnote-127)

The stars (the infinity of the universe), the past civilizations (the infinity of knowledge) and the ordinary everyday life (the infinite number of combinations in which a fact could take place or not), taught Stein that there was no such thing as repetition; only insistence. The existence of other worlds and constellations, and the testimony of innumerous different cultures that had walked the earth prior to the twentieth century were to Stein a proof that every single being, thing, or action was unique. The uniqueness of every single aspect of the world implied the urgency of an approach to human understanding purged of memories of anything previously known; also, because the same thing is to be perceived and understood differently by different people, and the same person would perceive and understand a given fact/object/person differently in different times of his/her life, to categorize becomes impossible, to describe, unthinkable (‘I say portraits and not description and I will gradually explain why’ says Stein). But these are the conclusions to which Stein came in the very last phase of her portrait writing.

Before we start considering the path that lead Stein to such conclusions via an analysis of the three phases of her portrait writing as she describes them in ‘Portraits and Repetition’, I would like to note an aspect of Stein’s attitude toward the task she was embarking on. The flamboyance of her public persona, added to sense of scorn and frustration provoked in many contemporary artists and critics by her sometimes outrageously cryptic work, have contributed to project in the collective imaginary a persistent perception of Stein as the bold and ruthless artist, a perception at odds with the sense of concern, almost anxiety toward her portrait writing in the following:

I wrote portraits knowing that each one is themselves inside them and something about them perhaps everything about them will tell someone all about that thing all about what is themselves inside them and I was then hoping completely hoping that I was that one the one who would tell that thing. Perhaps I was that one.[[128]](#footnote-128)

This anxiety, this urge to be understood, this need to share her perception with her public is also evident from her directly addressing the audience with sentences as the following, taken from 16 pages of text[[129]](#footnote-129):

I wonder if you know what I mean

Oh yes you all do understand

Do you understand. Do you any or all of you understand.

Do you do you do you really understand.

You see what I mean by what I say. But I know you do. Will you see it as clearly when I read you some of the portraits that I have written. Maybe you will but I doubt it.

Do you see what I mean. But certainly you certainly do.

Let me tell you just what I did as I did this thing.

Do you see what I mean.

The closing words of ‘Portraits and Repetition’ are both a reiteration of her need to be reassured about the intelligibility of her work and a statement about her intentions regarding portrait writing:

I am trying in these lectures to tell what is by telling about how it happened that I told about what it is. I hope you quite all see what I mean. Anyway I suppose inevitably I will go on doing it.[[130]](#footnote-130)

If Stein’ s insecurities were to be more widely recognized or considered, and as we have seen it clearly was her intention to let her public know about them, her compositions would regain their original status of dialogue, and the aura of inaccessibility that has often been projected onto them by her critics would dissolve. Why should one feel less at ease reading one of Stein’s portraits than observing Picasso’s?

**The possibility of the portrait: first phase**

I said in the beginning […] that if it were possible that a movement were lively enough it would exist so completely that it would not be necessary to see it moving against anything to know that it is moving. This is what I mean by life and in my way I have tried to make portraits of this thing always have tried always may try to make portraits of this thing.[[131]](#footnote-131)

At this point, a few pages into her lecture, Stein has already make use of the word ‘movement’ a dozen of times (without considering such lemmas as ‘motor’, ‘train’ or other kinetic-related adjectives), but it is only in this passage that she finally explains what she means by ‘movement’. By movement: she means ‘life’ and it is ‘life’, she admits, that she had always tried to portray. Not an expression of life, not something ‘alive’ but ‘life’ itself.[[132]](#footnote-132) She continues explaining how her portrait writing began:

If this existence is this thing is actually existing there can be no repetition. There is only repetition when there are descriptions being given of these things not when the things themselves are actually existing and this is therefore how my portrait writing began.[[133]](#footnote-133)

Stein’s views on repetition are reiterated in several points in the lecture, including the following:

There is no such thing as repetition. Think about all the detective stories everybody reads. The kind of crime is the same, and the idea of the story is very often the same […], always having the same theme, that is if you like, repetition, that is if you like the repeating that is the same thing, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis. [….] It is very like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop. A bird’s singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence.[[134]](#footnote-134)

What is being given here, under the form of an intuition, is a description of the portrait. A portrait will never be a description, and will be a thing existing in itself and therefore in turn impossible to describe. The formulae enact a double task. Firstly, by denying repetition and therefore the ability of description to function as a tool to understand the world, Stein eradicates herself from the ancestral expectation that in order to be considered ‘worthy’, an object of art should encapsulate a fragment of the same reality that was trying to depict (painting) or from which it stemmed from (sculpture). This more or less overt fee that the object of art had to pay in order to justify its existence functioned as a burden on the artwork, ultimately denying it the possibility to be anything more than a suggestion of that absolute from which it came from, the artist’s own inspiration:

This is the greatest difficulty that bothered anybody creating anything in this generation. The painters naturally were looking, that was their occupation and they had to be certain that looking was not confusing itself with remembering. Remembering with them takes the form of suggesting in their painting in place of having actually created the thing in itself that they are painting. [[135]](#footnote-135)

It was as if there had always been a need of being reassured that, after all, despite the awe and marvel a painting or a song stirred, it was always possible to track down its origin: not in some recondite regions of the artist’s soul, not in some mysterious god-given sixth sense, but right here, in the world we are all living in.

Secondly, with the following syllogism

A. It is possible to describe only what repeats itself

1. There is no repetition in things really existing

Therefore:

C. Existence cannot be described

Stein shifts the focus of the discussion on the artist’s role from what it *should* be, to what it *can* be, thus relieving art from centuries of misplaced expectation. But if an artist *cannot* describe, or at least refer to the world around him, what is it that he *can* relate to? Also, now that all his tools by being themselves part of that world are useless to him, how is he supposed to perform? What will be the center and the instrument of his research?

As we will see, the answer to both these question is univocal. Here is what Stein has to say about her beginnings:

I began to think about portraits of any one. If they are themselves inside them what are they and what has it to do with what they do.

And does it make any difference what they do or how they do it, does it make any difference what they say or how they say it. Must they be in relation with any one or with anything in order to be one of whom one can make a portrait. I began to think a great deal about all these things.

Stein is asking herself the following questions: is there a direct correspondence between an individual’s inner being and the way they relate to the world; is every individual unique or is the bottom nature of the individual a shared one; is it possible to make a portrait of an individual’s real essence, i.e. without him being thought or conceived in relation to other human beings? In other words, what is an individual and can he or she be artistically represented? Can human essence be captured? And what is that essence exactly?

All Stein had when she started writing portraits was her intuition that there was something inside every single human being that made him inherently different from any other person. She knew that the mere attempt to try to name that thing would automatically trigger a series of mental reactions, which in a matter of instants would have brought into the scene memory and consequently one’s ability to see resemblances. Once that had happened, description would have been the only option left: *The Making of Americans*, where Stein had first attempted to make a chart of every possible human type, is a perfect example of such a process and of the problems it involved. In the portraits though, Stein wanted to move further:

I had of course written about every kind of men and women in *The Making of Americans* but in writing portraits I wanted not to write about any one doing or even saying anything, I found this a difficult enough thing to begin.[[136]](#footnote-136)

The difficulty with which Stein was faced becomes clearer when we consider that in theory, writing portraits of people not ‘doing anything or even saying anything’, implies a static configuration of a human being typical of the painted portrait, which stand in stark contrast to the conception of the individual as a dynamic process that Stein had inherited from James.[[137]](#footnote-137)

This is made possible by the static quality of painting and the traditional static notion of characters. But since writing uses a temporal, dynamic medium rather than a spatial, static one, iconicity in literary portraiture had never been a possibility. Wendy Steiner maintains that James’ notion of character as thought process was important for portraiture because of the new matching of medium to represented object, which finally opened the way for a truly iconic literary portraiture.[[138]](#footnote-138) But my view is that despite supporting James’ theory, Stein throughout her portrait writing had been aware of the inherent inadequacy of her medium. While neither painted portraits with their visual appeal, nor literary portraits imitating the pace of an individual’s thought could alone capture the real essence of a human being, an up to that point unthinkable combination of the two (i.e. cinema) now provided artists with the answer to their quest. Unless we do not recognize the fact that Stein *all through* her portrait writing was painfully aware that cinema had provided the world with such an answer, we will not be able to fully understand the meaning or the final outcome of her artistic struggle.

**Talking and listening**

I remember very well what happened. As I say I had the habit of conceiving myself as completely talking and listening, listening was talking and talking was listening and in so doing I conceived what I at that time called the rhythm of anybody’s personality.[[139]](#footnote-139)

This is where Stein first states the real subject of her quest: *the rhythm of anybody’s personality*. At this point all we know is that it is somehow related to talking and listening. The visual aspect is utterly irrelevant at this first stage of portrait writing, and in the next few lines Stein explains why:

If listening was talking and talking was listening then and at the same time any little movement any little expression was a resemblance, and a resemblance was something that presupposed remembering. Listening and talking did not presuppose a resemblance and as they do not presuppose resemblance, they do not necessitate remembering.

In other words, as soon as the memory of somebody doing something in the same or similar way as somebody else’s was triggered, remembering was inevitable and so was description:

And one does of course by any little thing by any little way by any little expression, any one does of course resemble some one, and any one can notice this thing notice this resemblance and in so doing they have to remember some one and this is a different thing from listening and talking. In other words the making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or anything. Do you see my point, but of course you do. You do see that there are two things and not one and if one wants to make a portrait of some one and not two you can see that one can be bothered completely bothered by this thing.[[140]](#footnote-140)

The first phase of Portrait writing saw Stein facing the dilemma of ruling out description as an option: how was it possible to create a portrait ‘of any one as they are existing’? As stated earlier, Stein knew one answer:

Funnily enough the cinema has offered a solution of this thing. By a continuous moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing and there is that thing existing, it is in a way if you like one portrait of anything not a number of them.[[141]](#footnote-141)

Although she ‘of course did not think of it in terms of the cinema, in fact I doubt whether at that time I had ever seen a cinema’, she nevertheless admits that

I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing […] Each time that I said the somebody whose portrait I was writing was something that something was just that much different from what I had just said that somebody was and little by little in this way a whole portrait came into being.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Trying to make what she knew come out as she knew it, without remembering, meant that the moment in which she said or wrote what a person was, the person wasn’t that thing anymore, that person was something else, and so she had to say it again and again, without ever being able to grasp the ever flowing essence of that individual. All she could do therefore was to keep on stating what a person was moment by moment until she felt emptied and ‘so no longer said what they were’:

So you see what I mean about those early portraits […]. I built them up little by little each time I said it it changed just a little and then when I was completely emptied of knowing that the one of whom I was making a portrait existed I had made a portrait of that one.[[143]](#footnote-143)

*Four Dishonest Ones Told by a Description of What They Do, Matisse* and *Picasso* belong to this first phase of portrait writing.

Despite Stein’s resolution not to recur to looking, in reading *Four Dishonest Ones* one is under the impression of watching the opening scenes of a black and white detective movie, with the camera closing up on the characters’ comings and goings in and out of anonymous locations. We don’t know who they are, where they are, or where they are going. But before we even start reading the portrait we do know that there are four of them, that they are ‘dishonest’, and that they are doing something. Even while ignoring the identity of these four, the information we are given in the title is enough for the reader to start making presumptions and nurture expectations. In what way are they ‘dishonest’? And what is it that they do? Through the word ‘description’ the reader is lead to believe that everything will be revealed. In vain:

They are what they are. They have not been changing. They are what they are.   
 Each one is what the one is. Each is what each is. They are not needing to be changing.[[144]](#footnote-144)

The opening lines of the portrait seemingly frustrate the eagerness of the reader to know. But carrying on reading and the initial cloudiness gradually rarifies: Stein line after line carves the four unidentified characters out of the original matter they are made of, starting with a broad distinction: ‘One is what *she* is. She does not need to be changing. She is what she is.’

Gender comes into play and as soon as that happens the association between ‘dishonest’ and ‘woman’ is sufficient to unleash in one’s mind a myriad of century old clichés; from that moment on, that set of prejudices constitute the background against which every word of the portrait will be projected and compared, while the gradual realization of the remarkable discrepancies between that preconceived image and what is actually being suggested leave in the reader’s mind if not an accurate portrait of a possibly honest, certainly very brave, proud woman, at least a vision unambiguous enough (almost a negative of a photograph) to challenge that background. It is in the vacuum between these two separate and consecutive moments (expectation and its frustration) that Stein’s portraits (as well as the vast majority of Cubist works) come to life. Let us see how.

‘What is she doing’ Stein asks, with a straightforwardness that echoes the reader’s train of thought in real time. ‘She is working’. A tantalizing statement, that only encourages one’s eagerness to know more. Then she says a bit more: ‘She is working very well, she is not needing to be changing’. Still not enough to dismiss one’s conjectures, this sentence and the ones that follow shift the focus of attention from what she does, to who she is:

She has been working very hard. She has been suffering. […] She has been living and working, she has been quiet and working, she has been suffering and working, she has been watching and working, she has been waiting, she has been working, she has been waiting and working, she is not needing to be changing.[[145]](#footnote-145)

By now the issue of *what* is it that she does is not relevant anymore. The reader feels something has changed; Stein in a single line has transformed a ‘type’ into a ‘character’, someone who very humanly suffers and waits, has expectations and hopes, who ‘has been completely earning working’, as the last line referring to this first character states.

The second character is a ‘he’ and Stein introduces him to us as follows: ‘He is one working, He has been working a long time. He has been completely patient, completely obliging [,… ]’[[146]](#footnote-146) Here too the character is broadly sketched by giving a hint of a reality that exists outside him (working) *and* inside him (patient, obliging) but it might just be worth pointing out that while portraying the woman, Stein focuses *first* on her inner sphere (‘One is what she is’), *then* on the external one (‘she is working’). The juxtaposition of such patterns represents one of the tools that enabled Stein to convey a feeling of acquaintance with the subjects of her portraits, in that even without the addition of extra pieces of information (we still don’t know their names, or their professions), the reader’s mind, by now attuned to the cadence and pace (*rhythm)* of the writing used for the first of the series of characters described, is able, however subconsciously, to perceive even the slightest shifts in the style adopted to portray the characters that follow and in so doing to develop bit by bit a unique perception, distinctive of each one of them. That is what happens when in a movie the director chooses to assign each character a particular melody that accompanies their appearance on the screen, or to emphasize the atmosphere of a scene by the way the camera moves, or by the light in which it is shot.

Even at this point, when we have come to a sustained analysis of this first portrait, it is possible to see how daunting an attempt could be to try and sever the essence of the characters from the writing itself. The writing, its pace, its rhythm is not a means to portray them; it *is* them.

Another significant change that can be observed in comparing the first two characters (from now on referred to as A and B) is the use Stein makes of adjectives and adverbs. For A ‘quiet’ is the only adjective used, and the rather nonspecific ‘very’ the only adverb. If we get to know something about her at all, if we get to steal a look into who she really is, it is through the verb ‘suffering’. B is on the other hand coupled with ‘patient’, ‘obliging’ and ‘steady’ and ‘completely’, ‘naturally’, ‘regularly’, ‘honestly’. The use Stein makes of such lexical tools though, defies their traditional role of adding knowledge of the subject described, for they are hollow and tantalizing for they all openly hint to a pre-existing situation; one that involves other characters the reader is barred from. Why is B ‘completely patient, completely obliging’? Who is he trying to please, who is it that he has to prove something to? The point I am trying to make is that despite the increase in descriptive lemmas, B leaves in the mind of the reader an even more ephemeral trace than A. B ‘has been completely working’, he is a whole with his job (whatever that is) and because he is obviously strictly connected with other characters with whom he relates, his sphere of being and of action completely eludes us. Stein is not only attempting to portray her characters without turning to description, but is also giving us an example of how misleading and in fact thwarting adjectives can be: through them the laughter of a character or the beauty of a landscape can come to life, but the real essence of a human being will always defy the boundaries of the written word.

The third and fourth characters are respectively a man and a woman, and while an in-depth analysis would hardly add significantly to our understanding of the whole portrait, it is worth noting that again no mention is made of them moving at all. Furthermore, not even once in the whole composition it is possible to find a word related to the subject of motion. From the opening line ‘They are what they are. They have not been changing’, to the closing one ‘She is not needing to be changing’, this want appears to be intentional, since in this first phase of her portraits Stein had consciously decided to avoid ‘looking’, and therefore the whole visual sphere. She explains her choice:

The trouble with including looking […] was that in regard to human beings looking inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present with past and future time.[[147]](#footnote-147)

And yet, however hard she tried to keep on avoiding including ‘looking’, ‘looking’ was always present as the means through which her portraits were conceived: ‘You see what I mean, I did express what something was, a little by talking and listening to that thing, but a great deal by looking at that thing.’[[148]](#footnote-148) But Stein at the end of the first phase of portrait writing was seemingly not yet prepared to accept defeat; and if the predominance of the visual aspect in her creative process was undeniable, to simply re-introduce ‘looking’ would have been not only a sterile exercise in composing but would have also added very little to Stein’s attempts to write the essence of a human being.

From this point of view, Stein’s concentrating on *Tender Buttons* looks almost like the response to an urge to find temporary respite in a less intricate subject matter, before embarking on the second phase of her portrait writing. Turning her attention to the safer harbor of the unanimated world, she

… began again to do portraits but this time it was not portraits of men and women and children, it was portraits of anything and so I made portraits of rooms and food and everything because there I could avoid this difficulty of suggesting remembering more easily while including looking with listening and talking than if I were to describe human beings .[[149]](#footnote-149)

It was of course the time of *Tender Buttons*, where she began making portraits of anything except human beings. It was a breath of fresh air, not having to deal with the issue of ‘expressions’ and ‘resemblances’. But as we have seen in the previous chapter, even in this work Stein could not easily ignore movement and the visual issue.

The fact that artists engaged in other fields than the literary ones shared her l dilemma was no real consolation. Painters too, she writes, were ‘bothered’ at that time by the difficulty of re-creating on canvas the essence of a human being, a vision that would have to appear to be completely there and then in that painting, without future or past, almost materializing and coming to life in the exact moment in which a human eye would rest on it. Stein explains that although sharing her goals, it was not with the issue of time that painters had to struggle:

The painters naturally were looking, that was their occupation and they had too to be certain that looking was not confusing with remembering. *Remembering* with them takes the form of *suggesting* in their painting in place of having actually created the thing in itself that they are painting.[[150]](#footnote-150)

While Stein strived to avoid triggering in her reader the process of ‘remembering’ resemblances or movements or expressions, the painters’ *bete noir* (she argues) was ‘suggesting’ visual references outside their work. However the difference between ‘remembering’ and ‘suggesting’ is too noticeable to be ignored. The problem of avoiding remembering was one that affected both Stein, and her readers: her succeeding in getting acquainted with the real essence of the subject she was portraying without recurring to memory was the prerequisite for her success in eventually translating this experience into a kind of writing that avoided triggering the process of remembering in the reader’s mind. Stein’s portrait-writing style is *both* the tool that would enable her to capture the real essence of a human being *and* the portrait itself. But for the painters, whose business was looking, not to trigger memory was an even harder task to achieve. To hold a brush, make sure there is sufficient color on it and paint a dot or a line on canvas – these are all conscious actions. Stein could have even dictated her works, had she felt the need to detach herself from what she was creating; what we get through her writing is an echo of her thoughts, of her perceptions. Picasso could have never had somebody to actually paint his masterpieces, or to see them as he was seeing them in his mind. His body, his hands in particular were a filter between his vision or understanding of the world and his chance to have the public participate to it. The painter, in other words, is always consciously making efforts to represent or recreate or *suggest* on canvas his perceptions of the world. The task becomes even more daunting when trying to create a visual representation of something invisible. *Suggesting* becomes the most tempting of options, and the worst enemy to fight against, when trying to capture something abstract like ‘movement’.

A photographer of course, would be equally defied by ‘movement’, and by other intangible qualities like lightness, softness or happiness. But his struggle differs from the painter’s for at least two reasons. The first reason is a methodological one. Once the lens was in focus, the tripod stabilized and all the necessary preparations made, just like Stein, a photographer could in theory have delegated to someone else to physically take the picture. The second reason is a philosophical one. While the painter in front of a blank canvas adds color to it or a straight line to signify a street, the photographer extrapolates a fragment of reality from the world around him, a leaf, for example, and presents it through the camera lens aiming at expressing not only the leaf itself, but its intangible aspects; its color, crispness, smell. To borrow Arnaud Claass’s poignant statement: ‘In painting, the curve is a hill; in photography, the hill is a curve’. In other words, ‘interpretation’ or manipulation of reality is for painting (with the artist absorbing and elaborating through painting the world around him in his/her unique way) what ‘abstraction’ is for photography (with the artist struggling to ‘draw off’ that landscape, that table, that face ‘something’ that makes them unique and inimitable). To ‘draw off’ being the literal translation for *abstrahere*, it is appropriate to describe Stein’s portraits as ‘abstract’. In *Tender Buttons* Stein had thoroughly investigated the nature of the objects she was portraying. Her technique was to observe the chosen object for quite a long time until that prolonged ‘staring’ would spur a word-image into her mind that she immediately wrote down. It is easy to infer that having dedicated a vast amount of time to this exercise Stein must have developed a fine ability to perceive not only the physical qualities of objects but also the abstract qualities, impossible to photograph, paint, or describe. While for example it is possible to take a picture of something red, or of a kind person, it is impossible to take a picture *of* red, or *of* kindness. Red, or kindness can never be represented if not as part of the object itself. Which is precisely what Stein was trying to achieve in her portraits: to separate, or abstract, a specific intangible element of an object and present it to her readers so that they too could experience that quality. In her portrait writing of course, that ‘intangible element’ was ‘the rhythm of anybody’s personality’.

Because of the similarities between their methods and philosophy, it is my contention that rather than painted portraits and even cinema, ‘abstract photography’ was Stein’s ultimate inspiration for her portraits. As it has been previously considered, and by Stein’s own admission, at the beginning of her portrait writing, cinema had played an important role in helping Stein defining her own style and methodology:

[portraits] written […] in the successive moments of my realizing them. As I said it was if you like, it was like the cinema picture made up of succession of each moment having its own emphasis that is its own difference and so there was the moving and the existence of each moment as it was in me.[[151]](#footnote-151)

In the following paragraphs I hope to elucidate how the cinematic influence gradually rarified through the different phases of her portraits as the search for the ‘rhythm of anyone’s personality’ led Stein to explore the inner sphere of emotions. At the same way I will try to make clear how Stein’s decision to ‘do portraits where there was more movement inside in the portrait and yet it was to be the whole portrait completely held within that inside’[[152]](#footnote-152) was what made of the third phase ‘word portraits’, ‘word-abstract photographs’. Least but not last, I will endeavor to stress how ‘movement’ remained always central to Stein’s portraits. In the final stage, Stein’s writing has changed from the continuously flowing cinema-like style to the style that I would like to call ‘abstract photographic’. She describes it as follows:

All the looking was there the talking and the listening was there but instead of giving what I was realizing at any and every moment of them and of me until I was empty of them I made them contained within the thing I wrote that was them’[[153]](#footnote-153)

In the first phase, Stein’s portraits were the result of her painter-like attitude by which she meticulously charted her perceptions. In the third phase Stein thinks more like a photographer; she waits and looks until what she sees and what she perceives becomes *the* portrait. Just like the photographer she ‘created something out of something without adding anything’[[154]](#footnote-154)

**Second Phase**

The absence of movement typical of the objects portrayed in *Tender Buttons* allowed Stein to experiment with her writing without having to worry about triggering memories or suggesting similarities. ‘I did *Tender Buttons* because it was easier to do objects than people if you were just looking’.[[155]](#footnote-155) Perhaps inspired by the sense of exhilaration coming from being able to create portraits without ever recurring to description, Stein imports in the second phase of her portrait writing two features strongly characteristic of *Tender Buttons*: the immobility featured by its objects and the predominance of the visual component, both clearly related to the act of ‘looking’ that had been expunged in the first phase:

All this time I was of course not interested in emotion or that anything happened. I was less interested then in these things than I ever had been. I lived my life with emotion and with things happening but I was creating my writing by simply looking.[[156]](#footnote-156)

In other words, Stein is on one hand apparently declaring her loss of artistic interest for *any* kind of movement, be it intended as shifts in the inner realm of feelings, or as something happening in the outside world. On the other, she seems to be lifting the ban she had previously imposed on the act of ‘looking’ by recognizing its status as the irreplaceable tool that enables her to create. Once movement ceased to be an issue, to introduce ‘looking’ into the creative process was safe:

[…] after I had done *Tender Buttons* […] I began to wonder at at about this time just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. Did one see sound, and what was the relation between color and sound, did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself. [[157]](#footnote-157)

Stein had consciously chosen to momentarily leave aside the kinetic aspect of the world she was striving to portray and to concentrate instead on the relation existing between the words and what they were supposed to signify: ‘One of the things as I said that made me most anxious at one time was the relation of color to the words that exactly meant that but had no element in it of description’.[[158]](#footnote-158)

*Lipschitz* (1926) according to Stein is the portrait that better represents her most successful attempt at dealing with this issue:

Like and like likely and likely likely and likely like and like.

He had a dream. He dreamed he heard a pheasant calling and very likely a pheasant was calling.[[159]](#footnote-159)

The words *like* and *likeness* feature in a very prominent position. The two words, repeated several times, constitute the opening line of the portrait. By communicating her satisfaction with this particular portrait, Stein is giving us a very clear clue about what this second phase was really be about. It will be about *likeness*. Not the likeness between a portrait and its subject, but rather the likeness between words and the world they are supposed to be referring to. This is what Stein was eager to investigate at his point. Aware of the fact that, when attempting at portraying people, to use words which carried a kinetic component in them (as it had been done in *Tender Buttons,* for example) would simply not have been enough, and conscious of the impossibility of actually including movement in its kinetic acceptation into her writing, Stein decides to momentarily ignore the sense of failure always lurking in the background and chooses to concentrate on the ability of the artist to ‘see’ the connections between the means used to portray reality and reality itself. Thus Stein turned her attention to investigating the nature of words:

I was as I say at that time reducing as far as it was possible for me to reduce them, talking and listening.

I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description.[[160]](#footnote-160)

By maintaining that the words that most rendered the essence of what she was looking at were the ones with no descriptive qualities at all, Stein boycotted the instinctive conception of a causal link between the act of looking and the act of describing. To be sure, the revolutionary scientific findings of the twentieth century strengthened the belief that maybe after all it *was* impossible to trust what one was seeing, but I believe that there is no need to recur to philosophical explanations to understand Stein’s decision at this point to dismiss the act of looking as indispensable means to express the essence of a human being. It is sufficient to consider our own choice of words while describing someone we know to someone who has never met them. In general, the least we are acquainted with a person, the more we concentrate on their exterior characteristics (the way they look, dress, or walk) when describing them to a third party. This choice might seem a forced one (if I am not very familiar with somebody, what I can see is *all* I can talk about). But where there is a choice, in the case, let us suppose, we had to describe someone we know ‘inside out’, it is interesting noting that we would rarely start our word portrait by using words connected with their ‘visible’ reality. Given the choice, we prefer to highlight their personality, their tastes in music for example, their political ideals, and so on. Their physical description comes in a second moment, if at all. It is as if one could almost skip over their appearance, once their unique essence has been transmitted. Everyone looks like someone else. It is at least possible that by being subconsciously aware of this truth, we do not want to compromise the uniqueness of our beloved in the eyes of our listener.

The same awareness was at the base of Stein’s decision to abolish ‘looking’ when describing people she was very well acquainted with. After all, it is not possible to *see* if someone is honest, hard working or caring; but it is possible to feel or experience all of the above. The challenge at this point was to find a means to pass this feeling or ‘experience’ on, not only avoiding description, but also avoiding the creation of images in the mind of the reader.

The second phase of the portraits constitutes a further attempt made by Stein to portray the essence of a human being. What makes this moment in her career so crucial is the assertion that words, and those with descriptive qualities to them especially, are the most inadequate means to that end. Stein until this point had tried to find a balance between avoiding description and using words that would somehow convey a feeling of the object/person they were referring to. By maintaining that the words that made something she was looking at *be* that something ‘as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing’[[161]](#footnote-161)’, Stein announces the end not only of the first phase of her portrait writing, but of a philosophical approach that had underpinned all her writings up to that point. As it has been seen in the previous chapter, in *Tender Buttons* Stein had already tested words’s malleability and ability to become vessels of the most disparate spectrum of meanings and perceptions. Passages have been quoted referring to Stein’s ‘struggle’ to select the exact words that would be most apt at capturing an object’s essence. Already at that stage words did not relate to the object they were supposed to be ‘describing’, not in the way one would normally expect them to. There was however something *in* them, referentially, that allowed the reader to recognize or visualize a link between them and the external world. At least this is what Stein was aiming at making happen.

But in the second phase of the portraits the referential links between signifier and significant gradually simply cease to exist. Stein announces the end of the *struggle* typical of her works up to that point (a struggle that had sometimes seen her trying to adjust her writing to a set of visual norms) and approaches a potentially annihilating and claustrophobic new modus operandi. ‘Annihilating’ because as we will see, lexically, nothing intelligible remains of the characters we are supposed to become acquainted with; ‘claustrophobic’ because reading the writings stemmed by such an auto referential approach one has the most unpleasant feeling of being left purposely in the darkness.

I would suggest that it is not possible to understand Stein’s further steps in her career unless one grasps a few seminal changes that took places in this second phase. If I have managed to show up to this point how crucial the issue of ‘movement’ had always been for her, the *conscious* decision to leave such an issue aside cannot be overestimated. To me, this represents the equivalent of an admission of failure, and the momentarily change of subject i.e. her suddenly revived interest in investigating the iconic authority of words, something like an attempt to ‘buy some time’ while desperately trying to elaborate a Plan B to try and include ‘movement’ into portraits in some non-kinetic form.

According to Wendy Steiner, the critic that more that anyone else has tried to create a clear and logic division of the portraits into three phases, the portraits belonging to this second phase ‘are not homogeneous in the way that the early portraiture was.’[[162]](#footnote-162) She later explains that this lack of homogeneity is to be ascribed to a variety of styles that never ceases to surprise the reader. From the ‘would-be dialogue’ of ‘Monsieour Vollard et Cezanne*’*(1913)to the ‘most opaque prose’ of ‘Guillaume Apollinaire’(1913); from the nursery rhyme-like ‘Susie Asado’(1913) to the ‘incorporation of accidental detail into the body of the portrait’ of ‘He and They, Hemingway’. Steiner then proceeds in an analysis of the lexical features present in the above-mentioned portraits aiming at making them more intelligible. But her analysis fails to give us an explanation for the coexistence of so many different styles. This lack of homogeneity might be a indicator of Stein’s will to thoroughly test not only the ability of words to relate with the world (a will explicitly expressed in *Portraits and Repetition*), but also to sound-proof the validity of writing itself as a viable tool to portray. This would explain the gradual upsurge in the second phase portraits of a musical component. I will go back to this shortly. Now, I would like to dedicate a few words to ‘He and They, Hemingway’hoping that it will help clarify the issues. This is the portrait in its entirety:

Among and then young.

Not ninety-three.

Not Lucretia Borgia.

Not in or on a building.

Not a crime not in the time.

Not by this time.

Not in the way.

On their way and to head away. A head any way. What is a head. A head is what every one not in the north of Australia returns for that. In English we know. And is it to their credit that they have nearly finished and claimed, is there any memorial of the failure of civilization to cope with the extreme and extremely well begun, to cope with extreme savagedom.

There and we know.

Hemingway.

How do you do and good-bye. Good-bye and how do you do.

Well and how do you do.[[163]](#footnote-163)

In an attempt at deciphering the portrait, Wendy Steiner points out that its initial unintelligibility fades when one takes in consideration that Stein wrote this portrait in a French school-children notebook belonging to a series depicting ‘Les Educateurs de la Jeunesse’, whose cover featured a miniature of Victor Hugo, his portrait framed by four vignettes representing his works (*Lucrèce Borgia* being one of them):

If one keeps this in mind, the opening sequence of vertically arranged lines in ‘Hemingway’ takes on a totally new character. The ‘young’ of the first line recalls ‘Jeunesse’ in the title of the notebook series, and refers as well as Hemingway’s age and to his place ‘among’ the other young men of Stein’s acquaintance.[[164]](#footnote-164)

While these considerations are certainly important for the general comprehension of the text, they also prompt other questions. For example, how can something so accidental as the choice of a particular notebook be the inspiration for the text to be written on it? And how substantial was the notebook to Stein’s actual inspiration? Did she have already in mind at least part of it before she started writing, or had she decided to use another notebook, we would have never be able read it in the form we can now? Was the reader supposed to know about this notebook, when the portrait was full published and hence the connections between the text and its original paper support were severed?

Such a notebook is the tangible evidence of Stein’s attempts at moving away from the visual boundaries that had characterized her portrait writing so far (with words referring *directly* to the world she was portraying) and towards a portrait writing where ‘looking’ was completely superfluous and yet ‘movement’ was central, passing through the composition of portraits in which words refer *indirectly* to the subject of her portrait, *through* a visual support (i.e. the notebook). If, as I believe, Stein was at this stage well aware of the eventual failure she would have encountered at the end of her quest to portray the essence of a human being, the fact that in order to look for reassurance she would be tempted to turn away from the visual world from which her first attempts had stemmed should not be that surprising.

The emphasis on sound may be seen as another example Stein’s turning away from the visual world. When Stein writes that the *Geography and Plays* period

finally resulted in things like *Susie Asado* and *Preciosilla* etc. in an extraordinary melody of words and a melody of excitement in knowing that I had done this thing.[[165]](#footnote-165)

or when she later on states

This melody for a little while after rather got the better of me and it was at that time that I wrote these portraits of which I have just spoken, the second Picasso, the second Carl Van Vechten, the Jean Cocteau, Lipschitz…Portraits after my concentrated effort […] to really completely and exactly find the word for the air and sky and light and existence down there… [[166]](#footnote-166)

James McNeill Whistler’s definition of the new aesthetic doctrine of musical analogy comes to mind:

As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and subject matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of color […] Art […] should stand alone, and […] that is why I insist on calling my works ‘arrangements’ and ‘harmonies’[[167]](#footnote-167)

From the late Nineteenth century on, musical and visual arts have been growing closer and closer, up to the point where musical terminology has been borrowed to describe paintings (*Symphony in White* by James Mc Neill Whistler), and then photographs (*Music: Clouds in Ten Movements* by Alfred Stieglitz). I have suggested that Stein’s inspiration during the first phase of her portrait writing might have been abstract photography. This statement ceases to be valid here though, with Stein’s attention concentrated not on the subject of the portrait but rather on the connections existing between the signifier and the signified. It is as if the subject in the second phase becomes nothing but a pretext to observe the ability or not of words to convey any part of the subject’s essence. Once acknowledged that the contradiction that stems from the will to convey the immediacy of already being acquainted with someone, and the gradual process that led to that being acquainted, was one that cannot be solved, Stein started focusing more and more on the one way in which words could still point at a reality outside themselves: their musicality. For the followers of musical analogy, music, being a non-descriptive, non –discursive mode of expression, and by directly engaging with the emotions and senses, transcended language. The impasse is evident: Stein’s work, however abstract and non referential, could have never transcended language. The combinations of words that Stein uses in portraits such as *Lipschitz* may be indeed particularly charged with a musical component, the clusters of lemmas presented to the reader may well not bear any meaning, and yet however disjointed from and alien to the subject, taken singularly, they do still carry a meaning.

By Stein’s own admission this kind of experimentation was short lived:

But as I say I did begin to think that I was rather drunk with what I had done. And I am always one to prefer being sober.[[168]](#footnote-168)

One reason why Stein decided not to pursue this route any further may be provided by Whistler’s sentence above, in which he states the extraneousness of the subject matter from harmony of sound and color: to Stein the subject matter, the essence of a human being could have never been left out. This priority was what prompted her to take a further step towards the third and final stage of her portrait writing and to abandon her melodic experimentations.

In order to illustrate the way this shift took place, I would now like to go back to ‘Lipschitz’, which I, following Stein’s indications, take as the last of the second phase portraits (in contrast to Steiner, who places it amongst the early examples of the third phase):

Like and like likely and likely likely and likely like and like.

He had a dream. He dreamed he heard a pheasant calling and very likely a pheasant was calling.

To whom went.

He had a dream he dreamed he heard a pheasant calling and most likely a pheasant was calling.

In time.

This and twenty and forty-two makes every time a hundred and two thirty.

Any time two and too say.

When I knew him first he was looking looking through the glass and the chicken. When I knew him then he was looking looking at the looking at the looking. When I knew him then he was so tenderly then standing. When I knew him then he was then after then to then by then and when I knew him then he was then we then and then for then. When I knew him then he was for then by then as then so then in then and so.

He never needs to know.

He never needs he never seeds but so so can they sink settle and rise and apprise and tries. Can at length be long. No indeed and a song. A song of so much so.

When I know him I look at him for him and I look at im for him and I look at him for him when I know him.

I like you very much.

The relevance of the musical components is clear. What I would like to focus on is the incidence of terms hinting at a ‘double’

* the occurrence in the first line of the words ‘like’ and ‘likely’ (as it has already been pointed out) → creates the expectation of terms of comparison
* the words ‘dream’ and ‘dreamed’ → call to the mind its opposite: ‘reality’
* ‘two’ and too
* ‘he was looking looking through the glass’ → inside/outside-here/there; creation of a double through reflex
* ‘he never needs to know’ → truth/lie

It is as if Stein constantly strives at pointing at ‘something else’, ‘beyond’, or ‘other’. After all that hinting and pointing at, the last line is striking in its simplicity and directness: ‘I like you very much’. Here the word ‘like’ is used in a different context from that featured in the opening verse. There we had an adverb, here a verb, a verb that expresses the appreciation of one individual for another thus creating a link between them.

This passage epitomises the philosophical shift that is at the chore of the third phase of the portraits. The word ‘like’ in its adverbial acceptation signifies the existence of a similarity or common features between (at least) two entities that it is perceived by a third party who is merely acknowledging something he/she is witnessing from an external point of view. The verb ‘to like’ as in ‘I like you’ instead, while retaining the concept of a connection between two parties, reifies a reality that stems *inside* one of the two entities involved in the sentence. It seems to me that by hinting so concisely to the realm of feelings Stein reinstates abruptly as a priority her desire to concentrate on the real subject matter of the portraits, the essence of a human being. Stein describes this new phase as follows:

I began again not to let the looking be predominating not to have the listening and the talking be predominating but to once more denude all this of anything in order to get back to the essence of the thing contained within itself. […][[169]](#footnote-169)

In the third phase of the portraits the relations between the inner reality, or essence of a human being, and the outside reality will be ignored. The focus will instead be the essence itself. Stein continues explaining that she

wanted […] to do portraits where there was more movement inside in the portrait and yet it was to be the whole portrait completely held within that inside. I began to feel movement to be a different thing than I had felt to be.[[170]](#footnote-170)

About the portrait of George Hugnet (together with the portrait of Bernard Fay Stein, often considered one of the best of the third phase) she writes a few lines afterward:

It really does not make any difference who George Hugnet was or what he did or what I said, all that was necessary was that there was something completely contained within itself and being contained within itself was moving, not moving in relation to anything not moving in relation to itself but just moving.[[171]](#footnote-171)

Stein identifies the essence of a human being as movement; a kind of movement that does not need a term of comparison to be perceived. It does not have to move against anything to assert its existence:

It really did not matter what I saw or said or heard, or if you like felt, because now there was at last something that was more vibrant than any of all that and somehow some way I had isolated it and in a way got it written.[[172]](#footnote-172)

**Third Phase**

In the first chapter of this dissertation I have tried to show how Stein’s interest in investigating the nature of the essence of human beings can be traced back to her years as a student. However, the literary place where first this concern is made explicit is *The Making of Americans.* It was here thatStein aiming at finding out what was inside everyone that made them who they were; she started observing groups of individuals who shared similar features both in the way they looked and in the way they behaved or moved. In trying to describe every possible type, she divided them in groups or pairs. Eventually she realized that the task was an impossible one and she quit. But the study of so many types and characters made her become conscious of the fact that despite the similarities amongst them, the real essence of an individual was much more than a mere ‘sum of the parts’. Even had it been possible to reproduce every single aspect of someone’s personality and physiognomy, whether in a word portrait or in a painted one, the essence of what was that made that person that person, would still remain indefinable. The wholeness of a human being was certainly beyond what could be said about it or seen, it was more than a mere sum of its various characteristics and its essence was ineffable, invisible but somehow undeniably perceivable.[[173]](#footnote-173) One could say that while in *The Making of Americans* Stein states the problem, in the portraits she attempts to solve it.

So far we have seen how in the first phase the tantalizing dilemma of avoiding description had brought her to adopt an abstract style, intended at conveying a sense of immediacy of perception; we have also seen how the second phase had been characterized by a change in focus first, and eventually with the adoption of a musical style. But in the third phase of the portraits Stein comes back to her first ‘non-negotiable’ intuition: the feature that more that any other defines a human being *is* movement and ‘self-contained movement’ is the definition that Stein uses to describe the portraits belonging to this last phase.

Before proceeding at analyzing the two portraits that Stein considered her best example of self-contained movement, I will attempt to offer an explanation of what is it that Stein means when she refers to the ‘rhythm’ of a human being, and why does she consider it to be a fundamental constituent of human nature itself. As Giorgio Agamben points out, the word ‘rhythm’ is a recurring one in Western thought:

We encounter it, for example, at a crucial point of Aristotle’s *Physics* […], precisely at the moment when Aristotle […] tackles the problem of the definition of nature. To be sure, Aristotle does not directly use the word rhythm (ρυθμος); however, he employs the privative expression το αρρυθμιστον, meaning that which in itself lacks rhythm. Seeking the essence of nature, he relates the opinion of the sophist Antiphon, according to whom nature is το πρϖτον αρρυθμιστον, that that which is in itself shapeless and without structure, inarticulate matter subtended to any shape and mutation, that is, the prime and irreducible element […]. In contrast to το πρϖτον αρρυθμιστον, ρυθμος is what adds itself to it, composes and shapes it, giving it *structure*. In this sense, rhythm is *structure*, scheme, in opposition to elemental, inarticulate nature.[[174]](#footnote-174)

Could Stein therefore, with the word ‘rhythm’ be meaning the ‘structure’ of a human being? And what would ‘structure’ mean in this context?

Following Agamben’s stream of thought and considering the way contemporary critics have been using the word ‘structure’, we soon realize that there is in it an inherent vagueness:

‘structure’ designates sometimes the prime and irreducible element of the object in question, and sometimes what causes the ensemble to be what it is (that is more than the sum of its parts), in other words its proper status.[[175]](#footnote-175)

But where does this ambiguity come from? According Agamben, arbitrary use of the word ‘structure’ by scholars is not to be blamed: ‘rather, it is the consequence of a difficulty already observed by Aristotle at the end of the seventh book of the *Metaphysics*’. It is here that Aristotle appears to be facing Stein’s problem when he asks:

what causes the fact that – in an ensemble that is not a mere aggregate, but unity – the whole is more than the simple combination of its elements: why, for instance, the syllable βα is not the consonant β plus the vowel α, but something else.’[[176]](#footnote-176)

Contradicting the view of those thinkers who identified that ‘something else’ by which an ensemble is more than the sum of its parts as an element in the way the ones forming the whole are (an assumption that would led to an endless quest for an ‘immovable motor’), Aristotle designates that ‘something else’ to be not a material element (even if a primordial, universal one) but rather something that could be found only by entering the dimension that he called αιτια του ειναι, the ‘cause of being’, or ουσια, the originating principle that maintains every thing in presence: not a material element, but Form. Agamben continues:

Therefore, in the passage from the second book of the *Physics* referred to earlier, Aristotle refuses the theory expounded by Antiphon and by all those who define nature as elementary matter, το πρϖτον αρρυθμιστον, and instead identifies nature, that is the original principle of presence, precisely with ρυθμος, structure understood as synonymous with Form.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Rhythm is therefore to be intended not as a primordial element but instead as ουσια, the principle of presence that makes everything existing. I would suggest that is in this sense that Stein’s use of the word ‘rhythm’ has to be understood. When Stein writes for example,

If you think how you fold things or make a boat or anything else out of paper or getting anything to be inside anything, the hole in the doughnut, or the apple in the dumpling perhaps you will see what I mean.[[178]](#footnote-178)

the analogies with the ‘α + β’ example are striking. What is it that makes of a simple piece of paper a paper boat? The action of folding it, or the perception that one has of that same piece of paper, once it has been folded? The piece of paper and the paper boat are indeed one and the same thing, and yet, they are distinct. With its inherent reference to a sense of ‘flowing’, ‘rhythm’ then perfectly expresses that ‘quid’ Stein aspired at being the true subject of her portraits.

*George Hugnet* was regarded by Stein as one of her best attempts of delivering a sense of self-contained movement and in light of the concept of rhythm as it has just been considered, it might just be possible to see why:

George and Genevieve

Geronimo with a with whether they thought they were with whether

Without their finding out. Without. Their finding out.

With whether.

George whether they were about. With their finding their whether it finding it out whether with their finding about it out.

George with their finding it with out.

George whether their with their it whether.

Redoubt out with about.

With out whether it their whether with out doubt.

Azure can with out about.

It is welcome welcome thing.

George in are ring.

Lain away awake.

George in our ring.

George Genevieve Geronimo straightened it out without their finding it out.

Grammar makes George in our ring which Grammar make George in our ring.

Grammar is as disappointed not is as grammar is as disappointed.

Grammar is not as Grammar is as disappointed.

George is in our ring. Grammar is not disappointed. In are ring.

George Genevieve in are ring.

As Stein had said, it does not matter what George says or what he does. The only thing that matters is George himself. His name recurs in the portrait almost obsessively and almost always at the beginning of each verse, occupying a predominant position even in the crucial opening and closing lines. Stein could have hardly have put more emphasis on her renewed enthusiasm for the subject matter. After the temptation of finding respite from her struggle in the lexical investigation of the musicality of words, Stein boldly begins again from where she had left. It is as if this portrait could be considered both as a manifesto in which Stein states her final objective, and a recapitulation of the previous phases of her research. In this context the musicality of the text and its hints as to a grammar can be seen as a reference to the second phase, while the attention on the subject matter and the appearance of the word ‘azure’ point at the first phase.

But there is a characteristic which is unique to this portrait and that cannot be found in the earlier ones: its sense of flowing and its rhythm. There is not only alliteration, but more importantly a lack of consonants in the words creating it. While reading the text the air flows freely from the lungs of the speaker. Then there is the word ‘ring’ recurring seven times and appearing in the final verse. This too, reinforces a sense of a ‘closed circuit’ or of self-contained movement and the coupling of this sense of flowing with the recurrence of the name ‘George’, subject of the portrait, is what makes this portrait so exemplary for Stein’s attempts at capturing the essence of a human being. It seems to me that this is where inevitably the author has to come to term with her inability to go any further in defining or capturing the ουσια, the principle of presence that makes everything existing. Wendy Steiner quotes a statement made by Stein on the year of her death, in 1946, and it is easy to agree that it is seminal to an understanding of Stein’s awareness not only of her personal failure, but also of the portrait genre as a whole:

Nobody enters into the mind of someone else, not even husband and wife. You may touch, but you do not enter into each other’s mind.[[179]](#footnote-179)

Chapter 3

Stein’s Plays

In 1913 Stein started writing plays with the explicit aim of exploring the possibilities offered by the genre to find out ‘what made each one that one’ (74). In this final chapter of my dissertation, I will investigate what, 30 years and 77 plays later, Stein could be said to have achieved with her drama. In order to do so I will need to identify and highlight the train of thought behind their composition. Stein’s lecture ‘Plays’ offers one beginning point. In the previous two chapters I have availed myself of Stein’s own criteria to shed light on her work; here, dealing with her plays, I have even stronger reasons to look at her self-explanations, as in the case of the plays critics differ widely on their definition and number; on their literary intention, worth and meaning.

Stein’s plays have never been her scholars’ favourite subjects: given their abundance, the paucity of books focusing solely on the plays is striking. Their obscurity is not sufficient to explain the relative lack of interest, given the attention bestowed on *Tender Buttons* or *The Making of Americans*. And yet, as challenging as they might be, those other writings differed from the plays in a crucial aspect: their location in her career. The early works represent important early moments for modernism as a whole, and can be analysed and ‘placed’ clearly in terms of Stein’s own later notions of development; from verb to noun, for example. The plays however were composed over a period of 40 years, continuing to the end of Stein’s life. During this time their style, features and structure changed so radically as to make the task of composing an overview daunting. It is noticeable that most essays written on the plays tend to concentrate on a single text, and generally focus on the most-performed ones. Even the lecture *Plays*, composed in 1936 and certainly an indispensable tool for their comprehension, cannot be considered an exhaustive ‘manifesto’. As Dana Cairns Watson notes, Stein’s lectures were hardly a clear and unambiguous exposition of the author’s literary theories and credos, particularly for her contemporaries. After one of her lectures, for example, the *New York Times* reported that ‘At the end of the address there was obviously no unanimity of opinion among the audience as to its meaning or significance.’[[180]](#footnote-180) The editorial next day (‘The Devoted Band’ 3 November 1934) added that members of the public were left ‘bewildered’ and ‘with a splitting headache’.[[181]](#footnote-181)

And yet if we hypothesize that Stein had set out to write plays having in mind a certain scope or at least a generic impulse of some kind, it is worth asking whether there is, early and late, a common impulse which underlies the works and helps us understand their progress. In my view that impulse is a focus on the meanings of *movement*. With the plays Stein could finally incorporate the flux of life into her art, not simply as a hint (as in *Tender Buttons)*, or as an echo in her words that would create an image in her readers’ minds (as in the portraits). Movement was the idea implicit in every play, from their composition to their performance. It was the means through which she was going to bring them to life (and life to them); it was also the visible correlative of what she aimed at recreating on stage: that moment of mutual recognition between two human beings; the moment in which it is possible to have a glimpse of the other’s inner reality, the affectual movement of ‘being moved’.

Stein’s essay on the plays suggests that her formulation of the ‘play’ was partly paradoxical: she wanted her audience to immerse themselves in the constant flow of perception, but she also needed them to be aware that they were doing so; to apply the sense of critical evaluation which informs perception in real life. In order for this to happen she had to distract them continuously from the visual stimuli so utterly necessary to the existence of the play itself, so that they would not lose themselves in it (as, for example, the audience is lost to the flow of cinematic perception). She needed their awareness at all times. Her problem was how to depict a constantly flowing, constantly evolving and changing inner movement which is invisible; recurring neither to abstraction nor to narrative, as doing either would have been to interpose a formal element between the audience and the essence of what was happening. Stein had no other choice but to recur to physical movement, with actors moving across the stage in order to convey to the eye a tangible manifestation of the inner flow of existence. In this sense, actors were both indispensable and a hindrance. There is an inherent consistency and ‘thereness’ in a body. The public in a theatre instinctively concentrates on the actors. They pour all their attention over them, the flow is unidirectional. Just as it happens in the case of the portraits, one contemplates, the other is contemplated. There is no mutual exchange of information. In the case of the actors of course, they are aware of being under scrutiny, but they are not (traditionally) interacting directly with the audience. Both actors and the public exist in the same time and space frame, but they are bound by a tacit pact by which they both know that for the time of the performance everything and everyone on stage will be the representation of something other and further away.

Stein on the other hand, did not want her plays to be representative of something else; she did not want them to indicate something other. The subject matter of the plays had to be the here and now. She conceived her plays as a scientific experiment with actors and audience as reacting agents; the result of the meeting between their inner realities: this had to be the essence of the play. This pragmatic approach is clearly recognisable in her lecture, as I will suggest.[[182]](#footnote-182) The scope of the experiment was to make something really happen on stage for the first time, in front of her public, so that genuine feelings and real events could be experienced, instead of the rehearsed responses expected of a member of a paying audience. This could only take place if the audience was constantly stimulated into self-awareness in order to reach a state of continuous re-engagement with the play, thus achieving a constantly re-negotiated relation between the spectator’s inner rhythm and the play’s.

In the course of this chapter we will see how ambitions an aim this was; indeed, I will suggest it was not until the advent of digital puppetry in the 20th century that Stein’s problem of how to recreate pure movement, therefore avoiding the inherent ‘thereness’ of the human body, was solved in any satisfactory way. Stein was trying to grasp through theatre the *quid*, the essence of a human being, that something that made of someone that someone and not someone else. Whilst this quid has a very strong determining power, making every single human being recognisable and unique, I will suggest that Stein’s quid itself can be considered a universal principle, a principle that Aristotle identified with Form, or rhythm. The task of evoking that rhythm on stage so that the audience could recognise it, feel it within them, was only made possible by creating a space of communion in which there was no place left for barriers between actors and audience, between stage and life. Stein composed her plays always striving to create this common ground between human beings. In order to do so she could not tell, through her plays, stories that her audience would have found difficult to identify with, or deploy characters which could not be immediately recognised. The rawness and almost primitive style of some of her plays, their simplicity, the presence of nouns and verbs conjugated in their most basic forms, suggests the fundamental status of this communicative desire.

Most critics have deliberately ignored Stein’s remarks on her intention in her plays to tell ‘the essence of what happened’ instead of what happened. A detailed plot, set in a precise timeframe, would have deflected Stein’s aim to create a universal language through which the quid could manifest itself and be recognised by her audience. And yet we will see how, in response to that deliberate simplicity, meanings have been forced upon her plays.

Three published studies have been dedicated to Stein’s plays: Betsy Alayne Ryan’s *Gertrude Stein’s Theater of the Absolute* (1984), Jane Palatini Bowers’ *‘They Watch Me as They Watch This’: Gertrude Stein’s Metadrama* (1991) and Sarah Bay–Cheng’s *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein’s Avant- Garde Theater* (2005).[[183]](#footnote-183) They take quite different approaches. Ryan provided the first chronological listing of the plays, defining plays as writing that displayed juxtaposition, time, character, repetition, modification, rhyme and text division.[[184]](#footnote-184) But she offers little critical analysis. Bowers compiles a list of 103 plays according to any of the following criteria: Stein’s explicit referring to the text as ‘play’; its presence in *Operas and Plays*; the featuring of dialogue; divisions between main text and side text indicating it was intended to be performed. Bowers’ main thesis is that Stein never wrote the plays for performance, and that she labelled those writings ‘plays’ as a form of *jouissance* reflecting her playful attitude towards language.[[185]](#footnote-185) Finally Bay-Cheng focuses on only eight of the texts that she believed Stein wrote as dramas or scenarios, and attempts to connect Stein to the larger history of drama.[[186]](#footnote-186)

It is not my intention to enter the debate about which works ought to be labelled as ‘plays’, and neither is my intention to provide a critical analysis of them all. My aim is rather to investigate the reasons for Stein’s need to start and stubbornly keep on writing plays for over 30 years, and to highlight the central importance that movement takes on in them. The second chapter of this dissertation concluded with a quotation from ‘A Transatlantic Interview’ in which Stein stated that nobody, not even husband and wife, can really enter the other’s mind. It was her way of declaring the portraits’ ultimate failure in casting light on the process of relation between persons, due to the unidirectional flow of information from the portrait to the observer. Even acknowledging the portraits’ worthiness as a tool to fix in time and transmit from generation to generation aspects of the sitter’s essence, the non-mutuality of the exchange made Stein realise that the key to recreating in her art the epiphany of the ουσια to another had to be found elsewhere.

**From Portraits to Plays**

Stein was aware of having reached a dead end. In her lecture ‘Plays’ she wrote:

I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. […] I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play. And so I began to write these plays.[[187]](#footnote-187)

Acknowledging the solitary status of the human produced in her portraits, Stein turned to plays. So what is the difference between a portrait and a play? And why did Stein think that the key to ‘express this thing’ lay in the literary form of a play?

Two obvious elements suggest themselves: firstly, where a portrait is static and fixed in time, a play flows. Even if the actors on stage stand still, they will breathe and the curtains will raise and fall. Secondly, a play features interaction between characters. In other words, on stage during a play, there is an external and visible kinetic presence and an internal and invisible, but emotionally perceptible display of movement, and the two are closely connected. Since coming back from her 1910 trip to Spain, inspired by the way in which bullfighting and the Spanish dances seemed to allow the viewer to a steal a look into the inner sphere of human existence through bodily movement, Stein had the desire to incorporate in her writing more than just the sheer existence of the outside world. She now aimed at expressing the result of the relation between outer and inner reality. After writing *Tender Buttons*, in which she strived at capturing the vital vibrancy inherent to every object, its *original rhythm*, she turned to plays:

There was […] Spain and the Argentine and the bullfights and I began once more to feel something about something going on at a theatre. And then I went back, not in my reading but in my feeling to the reading of plays in childhood, the lots of characters, the poetry and the portraits and the scenery which was always of course and ought always to be of course woods that is forests and trees and streets and windows.

And so one day all of a sudden I began to write plays.[[188]](#footnote-188)

The key to link the ‘spiritual meaning’ of a personality, as Sutherland calls it, to the physical reality of the external world lay in movement, in rhythm itself, and it should therefore come as no surprise that soon after starting her career as playwright, Stein turned her attention to cinema, the visual technology which seemed to be able to physically capture the connection between movement and the emotional sphere. But as her play-writing progressed, Stein’s belief in cinema’s ability to express that moment of connection gradually shifted in favour of theatre. Stein came to believe that theatre rather than cinema had the potential to capture and recreate life. This should not come as a surprise, given Stein’s belief that ‘there is no such thing as repetition, only insistence’.

In 1925 Moholy-Nagy wrote:

In the exact mechanical procedures of photography and the film we possess an expressional means of representation which works incomparably better than did the manual procedures of the representational painting we have known hitherto.

From now on painting can concern itself with pure color composition.[[189]](#footnote-189)

Cinema’s ‘exact mechanical procedures’ allowed for a movie to be screened innumerable times, and certainly granted a degree of representation never attained before. But its formal constraints were compromise for Stein. She could never bring herself to overlook its bi-dimensionality and its being enclosed by a frame; nothing more than an optical illusion. When the observer believes herself to be watching a continuous motion on the screen, in reality she is watching fragmented bits of motion rendered continuous by the human perceptive apparatus.

The advent of sound and colour, far from making cinema more palatable, convinced Stein of its utter inadequacy in allowing the audience to grasp a glimpse of that moment of connection between their inner rhythm and the rhythm of the story being told on screen. The narrative nature of cinema, demanding the audience concentrate on the story being told, forced them to adapt their inner rhythm to that of the screen, thus creating a syncopation between the two rhythms as the audience’s memory underwent continuous solicitation, pointing to a distant outer reality. The following passage is taken from *Everybody’s Autobiography* and features Stein and Charlie Chaplin discussing theatre, cinema and movement. It explains Stein’s view on cinema and its inherent inadequacy in capturing something so unique and transient as the essence of a human being:

We naturally talked about the cinema, and he explained something. He said naturally it was disappointing, he had known the silent films and in that they could do something that the theatre had not done they could change the rhythm but if you had a voice accompanying naturally after that you could never change the rhythm you were always held by the rhythm that the voice gave them. We talked a little about the Four Saints and what my idea had been. I said that what was most exciting was when nothing was happening. I said that saints should naturally do nothing if you are a saint that was enough and a saint existing was everything, if you made them do anything then there was nothing to it they were just like anyone so I wanted to write a drama where no one did anything where there was no action and I had and it was the Four Saints and it was exciting, he said yes he could understand that. I said the films would become like the newspapers just a daily habit and not at all exciting or interesting, after all the business of an artist is to be really exciting and he is only exciting, when nothing is happening, if anything happens then it is like any other one, after all Hamlet Shakespeare’s most interesting play has really nothing happening except that they live and die but it is not that that is interesting and I said I was sure that it is true that an interesting thing is when there is nothing happening, I said that the moon excited the dogs because it did nothing…*he wanted the sentiment of movement invented by himself and I wanted the sentiment of doing nothing invented by myself,* anyway we both liked talking but each one had to stop to be polite and let the other one say something.[[190]](#footnote-190)

In this rich passage, where one can almost see the two artists struggling to keep their enthusiasm from overwhelming their interlocutor, both Chaplin’s passion for the cinema, for his ‘movies’, and Stein’s scepticism toward the cinema that can mass produce ‘movies’ but that not necessarily can ‘move’ are tangible. Stein saw a medium as mechanical as the cinema, however able to capture ‘movement’, or rather its illusion, as a hindrance to her cause rather than an inspiration. In a movie, featuring movement, something *has* to happen. Cinema needs verbs. But Stein wanted to create a new dimension in her plays, a dimension that would allow the realm of *being* to manifest itself, rather than the realm of *action.* As Susan Sontag wrote in her 1969 essay *Theatre and Film*:

… this youngest of the arts is also the most heavily burdened with memory. Cinema is a time machine. Movies preserve the past, while theatres […] can only modernize. […] Films age (being objects) as no theatre event ever does.[[191]](#footnote-191)

Stein wanted to be able to capture through her art the essence of what had happened so that the emotion of the reader/spectator would then, in her words ‘go on’ at the same time as whatever was going on in her writing/plays, thus achieving a chronicity generated by the negotiation between inner world and phenomena. It was the uniqueness of that moment (given that according to Stein ‘in life there is no repetition, only insistence’) that Stein had been trying to capture. Art, in its latest form of the cinema, had become more and more accurate in tricking the audience in believing those shadows projected on the screen were real life. But Stein, even though not exempt from cinema’s fascination, wanted more than that. She was not interested in a form of art that mimicked reality. The plays offered her the chance to finally let her audience be in the presence of life itself: movement, or to be more precise, movement within stillness, as Ryan calls it.

**‘Plays’, A Lecture: Stein, James and Heraclitus**

Stein’s 1934 lecture ‘Plays’ welcomes the reader with a veiled but clear reference to *movement* in which Stein immediately points out the link between emotions and kinesis. Stein opens the lecture by reminding her audience of a discovery she had made while composing *How to Write* (1931): that paragraphs are *emotional* (from the Latin *ex-*movere) while sentences, of which paragraphs are made, are not.[[192]](#footnote-192) In labelling this discovery ‘fundamental’, she explains that rather than a *contradiction*, this crucial difference between sentences and paragraphs was a *combination*. A sentence is according to the Oxford English Dictionary ‘a set of words that is complete in itself, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command and typically containing a subject and predicate’. A paragraph is defined as ‘a distinct section of a piece of writing, usually dealing with a single theme and indicated by a new line, indentation, or numbering’. Being complete in itself, a sentence does not convey a sense of movement or progress or flow; its existence is not bound to its relation to other lexical units. A paragraph on the other end exists precisely in virtue of the parts composing it, and therefore thanks to the relations between them.

The differences between sentences and paragraphs is used by Stein to mirror those between portraits and plays, the first self-contained and self-referential; the second owing their existence to relations between the different parts composing them. In the portraits, Stein had outlined the subject matter of her investigation: the essence of a human being. What is it that makes of one individual precisely that individual and not someone else. After having charted every possible type existing, she had come to concentrate on individuals, trying to re-create their essence on paper, through words. However successful she might have felt she was, the popularity of the cinema made painfully clear how limited her chosen form of art, writing, could be. From *Tender Buttons* through to *The Making of Americans* she had collected quite an extensive portfolio of portraits. And yet, even in the eventuality of some of her readers experiencing the feeling of being at the presence of Picasso, or Matisse or Mabel Dodge, her goal would still have been far from being achieved: if the inner sphere of her readers could be moved via an intuition about the essence of the subject conveyed in words, the outer sphere remained untouched. Nothing had *really* happened in the life of the reader, nothing had been *recreated.* Yes, the nature of the ‘sitter’ might have been evoked; but not *really,* rather in an abstract way; and given Stein’s typically uncompromising statement that ‘the minute painting gets abstract it gets pornographic’, it is not surprising that she felt compelled to find a way to make that epiphany happen on stage, in the real.[[193]](#footnote-193) As effective as her efforts might have been with the portraits, because that moment of awareness of having just been in the presence of another human being’s essence had not been mutual, they remained a sterile exercise. Plays could change that.

In the course of the lecture other two important aspects of Stein’s formation become apparent: her natural inclinations in observing people’s behaviour and interactions, and her scientific *forma mentis*, both honed by her undergraduate studies with William James and the medical school training. It was then that she started investigating the brain and spinal cord responsible for the processing of sensations under the guidance of Professor Lewellys Barker, who later wrote:

Amongst these students [at John Hopkins] was Miss Gertrude Stein, and I have often wondered whether my attempts to teach her the intricacies of the medulla oblongata had anything to do with the development of the strange literary forms with which she was later to perplex the world.[[194]](#footnote-194)

We might not be able to give Professor Barker a definite answer, but a scientific and pragmatic approach is clearly noticeable throughout Stein’s career. Stein approaches the phenomenon she is trying to reproduce from all possible angles, changing the reacting agents and the environment whenever faced with yet another failure. Her physiological background had taught her how a sensation was formed, but it was thanks to James’s teachings that the relationship between inner and outer world became clearer.[[195]](#footnote-195) Stein was convinced that no phenomena could influence our thoughts, hence our brain, unless the senses are affected first: physical perceptions are the door to knowledge. The act of reading itself triggers the movement of the eyes, and the words thus taken in had within themselves the ability to cause an even mightier stir in the mind of the reader. James wrote that:

it will be safe to lay down the general law that no mental modification ever occurs which is not accompanied or followed by a bodily change. The ideas and feelings, e.g., which these present printed characters excite in the reader’s mind not only occasion movements of his eyes and nascent movements of articulation in him, but will some day make him speak, or take sides in a discussion, or give advice, or choose a book to read, differently from what would have been the case had they never impressed his retina.[[196]](#footnote-196)

Dana Cairns Watson goes so far as to suggest that James’s *Principles* might have convinced Stein of the power of words to change people and societies.[[197]](#footnote-197) Certainly she believed that words could trigger in the mind of the reader the spark that would have ultimately led to the coming into being of a sensation. But Stein was not interested in just *any* sensation. Her ultimate goal was to understand what was that ‘something’ that made of someone that particular ‘someone’ and not someone else, in other words, the essence of a human being. Her experience told her that such a thing could never be portrayed through images, words, or sound. It could only be experienced when movement itself came into play together with vision and sound, as a whole, as it is the case when anything happens in real life. If Stein wanted to recreate on stage the ideal conditions for the essence of a human being to manifest itself and consequently to be recognised by the audience, she needed to avoid excluding one of these elements, or favouring one of them over the others:

Does the thing heard replace the thing seen does it help it or does it interfere with it. Does the thing seen replace the thing heard or does it help or does it interfere with it.

I suppose one might have gotten to know a good deal about these things from the cinema and how it changed from sight to sound, and how much before there was real sound how much of the sight was sound or how much it was not. In other words the cinema undoubtedly had a new way of understanding sight and sound in relation to emotion and time.

I may say that as a matter of fact the thing which has induced a person like myself to constantly think about the theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action is the same as you may say general form of conception as the inevitable experiments made by the cinema although the method of doing so has naturally nothing to do with the other.[[198]](#footnote-198)

‘Emotion’ and ‘time’ are the keywords here in understanding Stein’s problem of capturing and recreating on stage something so fluid and evanescent, something that could never be fixed on a support of any kind, canvas, film or page that it may be. Echoing Heraclitus’s Παντα ρει (panta rhei, ‘everything is in a state of flux’) Stein believed that there could be no repetition in real life, but only insistence; variations on a theme, we might say. In James’s words, ‘no state [of thought] once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before’.[[199]](#footnote-199) He also calls the mind ‘a theatre of simultaneous possibilities’. [[200]](#footnote-200) If we agree that for Stein representation was never a choice, and if we also agree that it would not be too far-fetched to state that what Stein was really trying to recreate on stage was a state of the mind, then we might also infer that the state of the mind she was trying to recreate was the highest possible: self-awareness. Not only did spectators have to be put in a condition allowing them to experience the moment of recognition of another human being, they had to be aware they were doing so. If she succeeded, everyone in the audience would have reached a place within themselves in which they could clearly recognise their own essence and link it to whatever was going on around them. Actors and their interaction with the audience were of course crucial for the achievement of such a state.

**The debate about actors**

The intensity of the debate amongst Stein scholars regarding her staging intentions with respect to the plays is interesting. J. P. Powers insists that they were never written to be performed. But some were, even in her own lifetime. B. A. Ryan and S. B. Cheng, in contrast to Powers, are convinced that Stein conceived her plays (as she said at least once) with the precise intention of seeing them performed.The fact that her desire to experiment with play-writing stemmed directly from her Spanish epiphany on the kinetic is evidence of Stein’s intention. Cheng writes:

While cinema clearly influenced much of Stein’s writing after 1910, including her poetry and short prose, the innovations of film most profoundly affected her drama. This influence suggests that Stein’s interest in drama and theatre was more than as written language, but that she also conceived her drama as visual work of art. [[201]](#footnote-201)

This supports the assertion that Stein’s play writing was never meant to remain a sterile abstract exercise. It was through the physicality of the theatre, through the relation between the scene and the emotions of the audience that Stein hoped to realize the continuous present:

I may say that as a matter of fact the thing which has induced a person like myself to constantly think about the theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action is the same as you may say general form of conception as the inevitable experiments made by the cinema although the method of doing so has naturally nothing to do with the other. I myself never go to the cinema or hardly ever practically never and the cinema has never read my work or hardly ever. The fact remains that there is the same impulse to solve the problem of time in relation to emotion and the relation of the scene to the emotion of the audience in the one case as in the other.[[202]](#footnote-202)

Theatre could (jokingly) be described as time-and-emotion study, in contrast to the Taylorism of the cinema: affect is directly present rather than being evoked indirectly by representation. Moreover the immediacy of cinema – its locking of the viewer into a temporal flow – pointed towards a key issue in drama. The following passage, with its remarks on stage and audience, helps clarify Stein’s thinking:

Then gradually there came the beginning of really realizing the great difficulty of having my emotion accompany the scene and then moreover I became fairly consciously troubled by the things over which one stumbles over which one stumbled to such an extent that the time of one’s emotion in relation to the scene was always interrupted. The things over which one stumbled and there it was a matter both of seeing and of hearing were clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around. Then the bother of never being able to begin over again because before it had commenced it was over, and at no time had you been ready, either to commence or to be over. Then I began vaguely to wonder whether l could see and hear at the same time and which helped or interfered with the other and which helped or interfered with the thing on the stage having been over before it really commenced. Could I see and hear and feel at the same time and did I.

I began to be a good deal troubled by all these things, the more emotion I felt while at the theatre the more troubled I became by all these things. [[203]](#footnote-203)

The opening pages of ‘Plays’reinforce this sense of simultaneous engagement with and disengagement from theatre, productive of a distance informed by a split temporality:

The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.

What this says is this.

Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.[[204]](#footnote-204)

The syncopation she is hinting at in the passage above is the result of the inner rhythm of the audience failing to merge with the ongoing unraveling of the play, and it is superfluous to point out that for that syncopation to happen, audience and actors do need to meet.

Stein’s view of syncopation needs some discussion. Syncopation, in its sense of an internally divided time, it is the opposite of what she was aiming at achieving: a moment stretched in time during which nothing happens, nothing other than movement on stage. Over this stretch of time – one could say during this theatrical version of her continuous present – Stein was hoping to be able to create a dimension for the two worlds of stage and audience to meet and co-exist in harmony so that synchronicity would ensue as the result of this encounter. This Stein says was the opposite of the nervousness she felt whenever she went to see a play:

The emotion of you on one side of the curtain and what is on the other side of the curtain are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other.[[205]](#footnote-205)

Listening to jazz, Stein tells us, also created nervousness through syncopation. Indeed ‘Jazz bands made of this thing, the thing that makes you nervous at the theater, they made of this thing an end in itself.’[[206]](#footnote-206) The difference of tempos was again key to the materialization of such a feeling. Nervousness, writes Stein, ‘consists in needing to go faster or to go slower so as to get together. It is that that makes anybody feel nervous’.[[207]](#footnote-207) And whilst Stein does not label nervousness as inherently negative, it was yet another factor to come between the audience’s inner self and their chance to lose themselves into the play. In order for that to take place, what happens or what it is said on stage must not matter, and in the moment the audience and actors exist in the same dimension of time and space, they become beings immersed into the essence of ‘what happened’ without its story having being negotiated across the space between them:

Go [to the play] like you would go to a museum, like you would look at a painting. Appreciate the color of the apple, the line of the dress, the glow of the light. . . . My opera is easier than *Butterfly.* You don’t have to think about the story, because there isn’t any. You don’t have to listen to words, because words don’t mean anything.[[208]](#footnote-208)

Although they could easily be, these are not Stein’s words, but those of Robert Wilson, the acclaimed producer and artist whose 1992 production of *Doctor Faust Lights the Lights* is often regarded as the most faithful theatrical incarnation of her dramatic vision. Through his distension of time, or ‘natural time’ as he called it, Wilson aimed to achieve ‘a physicalization of the [premise] Stein seems to envision in her plays: a meditative, visionary theater in which images and conditions, not people, are the active agents’.[[209]](#footnote-209) Through his elongation of time, a concept based on Stein’s own continuous present, Wilson was able to achieve that synchronicity between audience and performers Stein was aiming at. The audience should go to the play and simply listen, watch and try to be as open-minded as possible. In other words, Wilson, like Stein, is asking his public for complicity and faith. ‘Complicity’ because the audience should, in the words of Van Vechten,

take your seat in the theater […] with nothing in mind, in fact, but curiosity to discover what this form may be the author and composer, choreographer and decorator, have worked so consciously to create [[210]](#footnote-210)

‘Faith’, because the ultimate objective of both Wilson and Stein was something transcending the human mind and its ability to express *it* using rational terms, existence in its purest form: sheer movement, sheer light, without even a body to cage it in. This is the dilemma we have anticipated in the introduction to this chapter; and one could argue that digital puppetry, in the form of holograms instead of actors performing on stage, has provided the best solution to it.

**People watching and introductions**

At her legendary Saturday salons, Stein took great pleasure in introducing her guests to one another. During her American tour she told reporters ‘I like people, you see. I like to talk to people, I am always wandering around the streets having conversations with people. I like single human contacts.’[[211]](#footnote-211) She often simply carried out the formal introduction and then discreetly retreated, but only to keep a close eye on whatever was going on amongst the newly acquainted. Stein was fascinated by human relations, and by the way that, although the process of getting to know someone is a lengthy one, once a certain degree of acquaintance had been reached you can summon the whole essence of that person in your mind instantly and at once. In *Composition as Explanation* Stein stated that the business of art was to live in the actual present and to completely express the complete actual present. It becomes then clear why the issue of introducing oneself or being introduced to someone was very important to Stein as a play-writer, given that it marks the starting point of the process of mutual recognition between human beings, together with the possibility of becoming part of their lives. A lengthy section of ‘Plays’ is dedicated to the issue of ‘how are people introduced to one another’:

But to come back to that other question which is at once so important a part of any scene in real life, in books or on the stage, how are the actors introduced to the sight, hearing and consciousness of the person having the emotion about them. How is it done in each case and what has that to do with the way the emotion progresses.

Having stated the question, using her usual scientific approach Stein goes on to analyse it environment by environment:

How are the actors in a real scene introduced to those acting with them in that scene and how are the real actors in a real scene introduced to you who are going to be in an exciting scene with them. How does it happen, that is, as it usually happens.

And how are the actors in a book scene introduced to the reader of the book, how does one come to know them, that is how is one really introduced to them.

And how are the people on the stage that is people the actors act how are they introduced to the audience and what is the reason why, the reason they are introduced in the way that they are introduced, and what happens, and how does it matter, and how does it affect the emotions of the audience.[[212]](#footnote-212)

Stein answers her own question in terms of the mediation of theatre and the anthropology of the family (which she had previously dealt with in *The Making of Americans*):

In real life the familiarity is of course the result of accident, intention or natural causes but in any case there is a progressive familiarity that makes one acquainted.

Now in a book there is an attempt to do the same thing that is, to say, to do a double thing, to make the people in the book familiar with each other and to make the reader familiar with them.[…]

But now how about the theatre.

It is not possible in the theatre to produce familiarity which is of the essence of acquaintance because, in the first place when the actors are there they are there and they are there right away.[[213]](#footnote-213)

Stein was therefore aware, at least by when the lecture was composed, that it was impossible to recreate ‘familiarity’ at the theatre: by the time you had got to know all the characters involved, the play, or the opera was over. It was by remembering a fortuitous encounter in Oakland, that Stein is able to overcome this *empasse*:

I must have been sixteen years old and Bernhardt came to San Francisco and stayed two months. I knew a little French of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so French I could rest in it untroubled. And I did.[[214]](#footnote-214)

The word ‘untroubled’ deserves our attention. As we have seen previously, Stein was always troubled during her writing career by the desire, by the need to be understood, to understand, to make herself clear. It must have been exquisite for the young Stein to be able to lose herself for a while in such an exotic setting. And for the older lecturing Stein, the recollection offers an emblem of an immediacy not negotiated through knowledge (*conaissance*).

This feeling of respite, freed of all the tensions that normally characterise human interaction when first meeting someone, or when first being introduced to a new environment, is what Stein strived for. She wanted to ban from the theatre experience the effort of the spectator having to focus on negotiating a set of values or establish an interpersonal rhythm, producing an evenly suspended attention akin to that which Freud praised in the analyst.

Stein had always been worried by the process of acquaintance. How is it that the acquaintance with someone happens gradually, and yet once you know them you know them as a whole. By meeting someone and getting to know them we establish a direct connection with that same person as a child, and remaining in touch with them until the end of their, or our lives, we will forever *have been* part of their life. Nothing can ever change this. This simple fact underpins the Roman Catholic Church’s belief that it is possible for the living to pray for the souls of the dead:

Our existences are in deep communion, through innumerable interactions they are connected to one another. Nobody lives alone. Nobody sins alone. Nobody can be saved alone. Continuously, in my life enters the life of the others: in what I think, say, do. And vice versa, my life enters in the life of the others […]. Thus my intercession on behalf of the other it is most certainly not something extraneous to them, an external thing, not even after death.[[215]](#footnote-215)

Interestingly enough, as we will see shortly, Stein’s last words as a play writer were entrusted to the character of Susan B., in *The Mother of Us All*, a character who returns from the dead, as if Stein wanted to evoke for the last time a *Leitmotif* of her whole career: the incessant flow of time, the continuity between past present and future.

**The First Phase of Stein’s Plays:  *What Happened. A Play***

Stein loved to talk and to listen. Her biographers constantly report of banquets she attended, parties, conferences, interviews. Stein is seen eating and talking, walking and talking, driving and talking. In her lecture *Plays* she explains how the inspiration for her first play *What Happened* came to her:

I had just come home from a pleasant dinner party and I realised then as anybody can know that something is always happening.

Something is always happening, anybody knows a quantity of stories of people’s lives that are always happening, there are always plenty for the newspapers and there are always plenty in private life. Everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story. What is the use of telling a story since there are so many -and everybody knows so many and tells so many. In the country it is perfectly extraordinary how many complicated dramas go on all the time. And everybody knows them, so why tell another one. There is always a story going on.

So naturally what I wanted to do in my play was what everybody did not always know nor always tell. By everybody I do of course include myself by always I do of course include myself.

And so I wrote, *What Happened, A Play*.

[…]

I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play. And so I began to write these plays. And the idea in *What Happened, A Play* was to express this without telling what happened, in short to make a play the essence of what happened. I tried to do this with the first series of plays that I wrote.[[216]](#footnote-216)

Sitting at the table surrounded by guests, Stein realises how unimportant ‘what happened’ really is. The subject matter of the conversation is irrelevant compared to the common ground between guests that this kind of light-hearted conversation creates. Within this welcoming, accepting frame, individuals feel no harm in speaking their minds; in letting themselves go, baring their essence. There is little interest in what the conversation or play might be about; she rather focuses on capturing a glimpse of the inner spheres of existence of the participants and on their being immovable, i.e. contained by the body of the speaker and yet by nature constantly changing and flowing. Volatile and yet constrained. Stein focuses not on ‘what happened’, which could be anything, but rather on the emotions stirred within the people taking part in the conversation by whatever it was that happened.

Watson observes that *essence* is the French for ‘fuel’ or ‘gasoline’, another very volatile and yet constrained ‘substance‘[[217]](#footnote-217). This seems to back my thesis that ‘movement’ might be indeed the underlying motivation for the plays. She points to a metaphor often used by Stein and in one of its forms quoted previously, but worth repeating here: ‘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 of the essence of its going.’[[218]](#footnote-218) The essence of a human being’ is an inherently kinetic concept, and I would suggest that movement is both the subject matter and the tool with which that subject matter is investigated.

***What Happened. A Play***

I will shortly provide an example of how critics have tried to decipher writings such as *What Happened,* but first, I would like to offer Stein’s own explanation of what she was trying to achieve. Stein tells us that the idea in *What Happened* was to make a play the essence of what happened:

I have of course always been struggling with this thing, to say what you nor I nor nobody knows, but what is really what you and I and everybody knows, and as I say everybody hears stories but the thing that makes each one what he is not that. Everybody hears stories and knows stories. How can they not because that is what anybody does and what everybody tells. But in my portraits I had tried to tell what each one is without telling stories and now in my early plays I tried to tell what happened without telling stories so that the essence of what happened would be like the essence of the portraits, what made what happened be what it was. And then I had for the moment gone as far as I could then go in plays and I went back to poetry and portraits and description.[[219]](#footnote-219)

Stein in this passage manages to concentrate a few points crucial to an understanding of the Plays. She states the subject matter of the plays: it might not be very clear to us what she means when she talks about ‘the essence of what happened’, but it is quite apparent that her intention was not to send her reader into a wild goose chase trying to find a meaning hidden between the lines; the debate should be about whether she eventually managed to capture that essence and not about what she actually meant to say in her plays.

Stein also states that it is not what we know that makes us who we are. The essence of a human being has got nothing to do with the ephemeral stream of news which everyone experiences everyday. Stories do not affect our essence. Finally Stein asserts that both in her portraits and in her early plays she tried to reveal the essence of her subjects without telling stories, and she does so as she inserts in her discourse a consequential link between portraits and plays: once she had exhausted the experimenting potential of one genre, she moved onto the next. Stein’s pragmatic approach could not be better exemplified.

It is with these propositions in mind that Stein’s plays should be approached. I would like to bring, as an example of the kind of conclusions that can be drawn if Stein’s guidelines are ignored, Watson’s comment on *What Happened*. She suggests that Stein is conjuring up the image of a ‘sharp-witted person surrounded by listeners’:

Perhaps a quick, quiet sharp woman in a fur coat is ‘surrounded’ by a ‘rapt’ audience. Perhaps men ‘sir around’ her, and think of something akin to rape. […] Perhaps she has age spots (‘spots old’) and a fur coat: she could be wrapped (‘rapt’) in the skin of a ‘tiger’, or, more likely, she is the tiger or raptor wearing a (leopard?) spotted ‘overcoat’. If she were an animal, her skins would camouflage her; since she is an old woman, her aging skin and quick wit protect her from certain kinds of suspicions. She is ‘securely arranged’ and dangerous in a ‘secret’ way. [[220]](#footnote-220)

However fascinating this interpretation might be, I remain unconvinced that a meaning can be produced from Stein’s words in this way. I find it hard to believe that Stein could have wanted to go through the trouble of producing an ‘encrypted’ story for an actual audience, as Watson suggests. For argument’s sake, let us imagine for a moment that this might be the case, with the members of the public having to use all their concentration in order to make any sense out of what is being said on stage. It becomes immediately apparent that this is problematic. To argue otherwise would mean to ignore Stein’s pleas for a kind of theatre with which the audience could feel in synchrony; the hypothesis of a hidden meaning behind Stein’s words contradicts the very impulse that pushed Stein to write plays: to allow the audience or reader to reach a state of conscience through her words in which there were no barriers anymore between an inner and outer sphere of existence. Stein did not want the reader/spectator to linger on the meaning of her words anymore than a musician wants the audience to linger on every single note of his composition. However carefully chosen and mathematically ordered within the frame of the opera, both words and notes lose their meaning if decontextualized. Stein’s writings, especially her poems and plays, works in which the evocative power of the word is most effective, come alive if read aloud. Words, intrinsically bearers of a meaning or at least of a lexical association within themselves, are freed from their bi-dimensional existence on paper, and through the reader’s voice gain movement, they lift up from the page and become sounds. The human mind is hardwired to detect patterns and Stein’s knowledge on the matter, thanks to her Radcliffe studies, allowed her to create for her readers a tantalising status in which they are continuously kept on the verge of making some sense out of what they are reading but never really managing. Stein, aware of the human mind’s innate tension toward rationality and order, creates sequences of words that she then constantly rearranges so that it becomes impossible to make logical connections. This is not to say that words chosen by Stein are without meaning; rather than describing aspects of the subject matter they evoke it, just as an aria’s particular passage does not depict in front of our eyes a specific scene, but rather transmits a joyous, eerie, or sad feeling. In the words of Mabel Dodge:

In Gertrude Stein’s writing every word lives and, apart from concept, it is so exquisitely rhythmical and cadenced that if we read it aloud and receive it as pure sound, it is like a kind of sensuous music. Just as one may stop, for once, in a way, before a canvas of Picasso, and, letting one’s reason sleep for an instant, may exclaim: “It *is* a fine pattern!” so, listening to Gertrude Steins’ words and forgetting to try to understand what they mean, one submits to their gradual charm.[[221]](#footnote-221)

Going back to the passage cited above from *What Happened. A Play* with this frame of mind, without trying to force a meaning upon it, freed from the burden of having to make sense out of what we are reading, allows us to let the words reach us, provoke us and prompt us into self-awareness with the power they were originally intended to have. ‘Tiger’, ‘rapt’, ‘blinding’, ‘flurry’. Universally these words evoke fear, being attacked, surprise; they create certain emotions and set a particular atmosphere rather than tell a story. Stein is constantly changing the rhythm of her lines and the semantic or conceptual matrix of her words. Act 2 of *What Happened* is formed of 3 sections. The first one is very upbeat and numbers characterise it (‘’*Four and nobody wounded, five and nobody flourishing, six and nobody talkative, eight and nobody sensible’’)*; the second focuses on dimensions rather than numbers and sounds suggestive of a more relaxed state; in the third the rhythm changes yet again and sonic repetition predominates (memory of more moon, a connection a clam cup connection). The reader or spectator can immerse himself in the environment created by the words and yet he is not allowed to lose himself in it, as attention is constantly shifted and recalibrating in the ever-changing fabric of the play.

I would like now to go back for a moment to the opening of the lecture ‘Plays’,and in particular to Stein’s affirmation that sentences are not emotional and paragraphs are. The word emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*: *ex = out* and *movere = move*,and it bears a very strong kinetic connotation. We can perhaps think of a paragraph as a train, and of sentences as the wagons carrying fragments of the whole ‘theme’ the paragraph is conveying. Sentences might make sense within a strictly grammatical point of view, however if removed from the context of a paragraph, their real meaning is lost. But paragraphs, made up by a *combination* of sentences, are *emotional*; they *do* convey a thought, transmit an opinion, make a point. This statement opens the way to a multitude of questions: how can a paragraph become emotional, if it is formed by emotion*less* sentences? What is it that functions as a catalyst for such a transformation?

One answer to these questions is suggested by the seventh book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics.* The relation between sentences and paragraphs to which Stein refers in the opening of the lecture ‘Plays’is a clear reminder of a concept already presented in the lecture ‘Portraits and Repetition’through the similitude of the paper boat:

If you think how you fold things or make a boat or anything out of paper or getting anything to be inside anything, the hole in the doughnut or the apple in the dumpling perhaps you will see what I mean.[[222]](#footnote-222)

A paper that is folded to form a boat is not just a paper anymore. ‘Something’ caused the paper, *and* its folds to become something. What is it that made so that the sum of the paper with its folds resulted in a boat? In other words, what is it that caused the whole to be more than the sum of its parts? Aristotle’s answer was its Form.

Just like the Aristotelian ‘α + β = αβ’, a paragraph, Stein affirms, is more than the sum of its parts. Hence, it seems to me that by placing such a digression right at the beginning of her lecture, Stein is suggesting that when considering her plays we should not limit ourselves at trying to make sense of what we can see and touch and hear. Rather, we should try to feel how all of these aspects are becoming something else, how all these different stimuli we are subjected to, flow. Going back to the parallel sentence- paragraph / portraits-play, we could say that the plays are another *form* of portraits, *form* being the quid that makes a portrait flow. If the spectator manages to become part of the flow, part of the rhythm of the play (the word ‘rhythm’ comes from the Greek ρέω, to flow), then there will be no partition anymore between real life and play. Under these circumstances, he or she might experience an enlightened moment of *ek-stasis* and perceive their awareness of being in the presence of the essence of *the* human being. It is not uncommon for characters in Stein’s play to have no names, or for them to have multiple names. What we have on stage is not a particular person, but rather personification of characteristics typical of human beings, or of human beings who thanks to their merits in life (Saints, suffragettes, artists, politicians) have reached a heightened status that makes them rise above their individuality. The moment of *ek-stasis* allows the spectator to escape momentarily from the relentless flow of being allowing him to become the recipient of the epiphany. Talking about rhythm Giorgio Agamben writes:

Yet rhythm – as we commonly understand it – appears to introduce into this eternal flow a split and a stop. Thus in a musical piece, although it is somehow in time, we perceive rhythm as something that escapes the incessant flight of instants and appears almost as the presence of an atemporal dimension in time. In the same way, when we are before a work of art or a *landscape* bathed in the light of its own presence, we perceive a stop in time, as though we were suddenly thrown into a more original time. There is a stop, an interruption in the incessant flow of instants that, coming from the future, sinks into the past, and this interruption, this stop, is precisely what gives and reveals the particular status, the mode of presence proper to the work of art or the landscape we have before our eyes. We are as though held, arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an *ek-stasis* in a more original dimension.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Agamben here mentions two concepts dear to Stein: rhythm and landscape. Syncopation and jazz bands are mentioned right at the opening of the lecture *Plays*, whilst she dedicates to the landscape plays the last part of it. Both rhythm and landscapes can be seen as ‘the punctuation’ within a whole: a musical piece in the first instance, nature in the second. When we find ourselves at the presence of an awe-inspiring landscape or of a particularly intense piece of music we might perceive what Agamben refers to as ‘a stop in time’, when we recognise in what we are experiencing smithereens of eternity. Both rhythm and landscape have escaped what Agamben calls ‘the incessant flight of instants’. I propose that it is within this ‘original dimension’, within this ‘split and stop’, that the epiphany of the essence of a human being Stein was aiming at evoking on stage could take place. ‘Evoking’ because Stein’s quest to find out the essence of a human being culminated eventually in her admitting that the closest anyone could get to defining it was by pointing which leaves the task of recognition to an act of intuition or *ek-stasis.* Although Stein never openly stated this, implicit in her last works is the realization that grasping or representing the essence of the human in a rational way was impossible. An act of faith was required. The lecture ‘Plays’was written in 1934. But Stein continued writing plays until 1947, the year she died. ‘Plays’is the only literary place where Stein’s students can find significant clues to an understanding of her theatrical composition up to 1934*.* The closing lines of the lecture have crystallised in time Stein’s conclusions about the plays up to that year:

Anyway I did write *Four Saints* an Opera to be sung and I think it did *almost* what I wanted, it made a landscape and the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep time. […]

Anyway the play as I see it is exciting and it moves but it also stays and that is as I said in the beginning *might* be what a play should do.[[224]](#footnote-224)

That ‘almost’ suggests that Stein, in 1934, was not entirely satisfied with what she had achieved so far. And as we will see in the last play *The Mother of Us All* (1947), 13 years on the quest for ‘what I wanted’ was far from over.

The element that allowed Stein to get closer and closer to creating a form of theatre that would have enabled her to capture the essence of a human being, was movement. A paragraph conveys a concept, we have seen. In reading it, it is possible to understand its meaning, hence to become recipients of a thought. Similarly, when one gets to know someone, i.e. synthesizes all the *emotionless* pieces of information about someone and starts *feeling* an acquaintance with that someone, then one does too become the recipient of a ‘thought’ that somehow *became* that someone. In both cases it is a matter of adding *movement* or flow into the equation; in the first case, the eyes moving from one side to the other of the line become the means through which the words, the sentences and the paragraph reach the human mind which then elaborates and brings them to life. In the case of getting to know someone, words, sentences and paragraphs are substituted by physical traits, mannerisms, and personality. What bestows *meaning* onto a paragraph and *a sense of acquaintance* onto a person is the human mind. However, it is still beyond our cognitive means to unveil the nature of that *meaning* and of that *sense of acquaintance*, fruits of the act of synthesis performed by the mind. In other words, we do not know where do these two entities come from, and what are they made of. Whether we think of them as pre-existing units or as the products of the process of our minds, whether in other words we believe to be the creators of these two different kinds of meaning, or merely see ourselves as the beneficiaries of their revelation, their nature still remains mysterious. Because of this, man is left with the only certainty of the awareness of the inherent potential fallibility of our species to recognise or elaborate the true essence of something *other* than ourselves. Stein’s mythical last words as reported by Toklas gesture towards this limitation: ‘What is the answer’, and then not receiving a reply ‘Then what is the question’.

But the problem of the public not managing to get acquainted with the characters of the play before the play ended was only one of the problems afflicting Stein. Another problem was, as we have already seen, the difficulty of the spectator synchronizing his or her emotion to the action on stage:

Then gradually there came the beginning of really realizing the great difficulty of having my emotion accompany the scene and then moreover I became fairly consciously troubled by the things over which one stumbles over which one stumbled to such an extent that the time of one’s emotion in relation to the scene was always interrupted. The things over which one stumbled and there it was a matter both of seeing and of hearing were clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around. Then the bother of never being able to begin over again because before it had commenced it was over, and at no time had you been ready, either to commence or to be over. Then I began to vaguely wonder whether I could see and hear at the same time and which helped or interfered with the other and which helped or interfered with the thing on the stage having been over before it really commenced. Could I see and hear and feel at the same time and did I.[[225]](#footnote-225)

For Stein theatre had always been a incredibly exasperating experience. The way the actors talked, their mannerisms, their clothes, all of this and much more contributed to distracting her from the play itself. She started questioning whether she would ever be able to synchronize her emotions with the action on stage. An answer, a positive one, came when she went to San Francisco to assist to the performance of a play in French:

I must have been sixteen years old […] I knew a little French of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice so varied and it all being so French I could rest in it untroubled. And I did.

It was better than the opera because it went on. It was better than the theatre because you did not have to get acquainted. The manners and customs of the French theatre created a thing in itself and it existed in and for itself […] It was for me a very simple direct and moving pleasure. [[226]](#footnote-226)

Because the play was in a foreign language, Stein found it easier to ‘let herself go’ and enjoy the performance without feeling the burden of having to see everything and hear everything. The voice of the actress became like music, and words became beautiful rather than meaningful. Stein could concentrate in the melody and rhythm instead, and feel free to let her eyes wander without risking missing something crucial in the plot. In this way, the problem with characters, of having to get acquainted with them, was solved. By immersing herself fully and instantly in the atmosphere of the play rather than with the play itself, the actors and the characters they were impersonating became part of a landscape over which her gaze was free to indulge freely, in her own time.

In her lecture ‘Plays’Stein explained this concept of ‘landscape’:

in my portraits I had tried to tell what each one is without telling stories and now in my early plays I tried to tell what happened without telling stories so that the essence of what happened would be like the essence of the portraits, what made what happened be what it was. […]

Then I began to spend my summers in Bilignin in the department of the Ain and there I lived in a landscape that made itself its own landscape. I slowly came to feel that since the landscape was the thing, I had tried to write it down in *Lucy Church Amiably* and I did but I wanted it even more really, in short I found that since the landscape was the thing, a play was a thing and I went on writing plays a great many plays. The landscape in Bilignin so completely made a play that I wrote quantities of plays.

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so the play being written the relation between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it. Well I did look at it and the result is all in the plays that I have printed as *Opera and Plays.*[[227]](#footnote-227)

The writings included in *Opera and Plays* include *A List, Say it with Flowers, Louise XI and Madame Giraud* and *Madame Recamier*. Stein chooses these in clarifying what she meant by saying that she tried to write a play as if it was a landscape, in other words, a piece of writing create to be performed on stage that had no progress in it, no action, and that like a landscape is all there in the moment we set our eyes on it. We might then focus on one particular aspect of what is before us, but while we do so, the whole landscape does not change, we can contemplate it quietly, without rushing, as it will not mutate while we do so. We can go back to it again and again, and savor elements of it we had not noticed before; we can wait respecting our own timing until we are ready to take it all in. A landscape does not rush us, and has no meaning, except its being there. The story of its coming into being is embedded in its sheer existence. When we look at a mountain, we might or might not be aware of the geological process that created it; what matters is that what we are looking at, is *what happened*.[[228]](#footnote-228)

**Still Movement or the immovable motor**

I would suggest that Stein’s constant referring to stillness and absence of change in her plays creates a red herring for some critics who, as we have seen, maintain that her plays were never meant to be performed. But we have also seen how Stein in her lecture never fails to attract the reader’s attention to the way actors talk, and move, and perform. If Stein indeed meant for her plays to be staged, the achievement of the still movement she desired came from the combination of two elements: the actors’ movements on stage, and the landscape-like unit they created on stage:

In *Four Saints* I made the Saints the landscape. All the saints 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. These attendant saints were the landscape and it the play really is a landscape.

A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there.[[229]](#footnote-229)

When Stein writes that in a landscape nothing really moves, I believe it would not be wrong to imagine that what she meant was ‘in a landscape it does not really matter if something moves or not’, because the wholeness, the ‘being-thereness’ of the landscape itself is not compromised or touched by some of the elements ‘inhabiting’ it moving. A brilliant metaphor involving magpies serves Stein well in her attempt to elucidate the affirmation that her saints *were* the landscape. It also brings us back to the notably conspicuous number of occasions in which religious references emerge throughout the plays:

Magpies are in the landscape that is they are in the sky of a landscape, they are black and white and they are in the sky of the landscape in Bilignin and in Spain, especially in Avila. When they are in the sky they do something that I have never seen any other bird they hold themselves up and down and look flat against the sky.

A very famous French inventor of things that have to do with stabilization in aviation told me that what I told him magpies did could not be done by any other bird but anyway whether the magpies at Avila do do it or not at least they look as if they do do it. They look exactly like the birds in the annunciation pictures the bird which is the Holy Ghost and rests flat against the side sky very high.[[230]](#footnote-230)

In a way therefore, the magpies (actors) bestow the sky with a dimension; their ‘flatness’ makes the sky deeper. By moving in it, they create space (or a perception of it) that was not there before. It is interesting that Stein assimilates the magpies to the dove usually representing the Holy Ghost in religious iconography. It is a very powerful image, and it resonates immediately in our mind, conferring to the magpies’ metaphor a much more poignant meaning. It also becomes very easy to picture in our minds the hovering she is referring to. Finally, the whiteness of the dove, symbol of purity and deliverance, tinges suddenly the being black and white of the magpie with a strangely eerie hue and this uncomfortable feeling stretches also to the figure of Saint Theresa, the one of the *Four Saints* whose name is associated with Avila. This ‘uneasiness’ (sense of doom) seems to linger on as a seminal element in Stein’s account of how she came to comprehend the continuity of the different stages of a human life:

While I was writing *Four Saints* I wanted one always does want the saints to be actually saints before them as well as inside them, I had to see them as well as feel them. As it happened there is on the Boulevard Raspail a place were they make photographs that have always held my attention. They take a photograph of a young girl dressed in the costume of her ordinary life and little by little in successive photographs they change it into a nun. These photographs are small and the thing take four or five changes but at the end it is a nun and this is done for the family when the nun is dead and in memoriam. For years I had stood and looked at these when I was walking and finally when I was writing Saint Therese in looking at these photographs I saw how Saint Therese existed from the life of an ordinary young lady to that of the nun. And so everything was actual and I went on writing.[[231]](#footnote-231)

Photographs then were taken with the intention to register that stillness which the nun had achieved through the vote of chastity. But to Stein they become a metaphor of the various stages of that woman’s life; like pebbles found on the bank of a river, Stein throws these photographs back into the continuous flow of life they had been picked out of. By doing so, she hints at the driving force behind her playwriting: her willingness to defy death through movement.

Religion is undeniably the most common answer to the primordial question: ‘why am I here?’ One of Stein’s personal answers to that question was: I am here because one of my siblings died and my parents decided to fill that void by conceiving me. In other words, Stein existed, her essence did, because death had occurred. Could this desire to celebrate life and its continuity be rooted in Stein’s painful awareness of her own existence being merely an accident, a consequence of her parents having lost a child? Given such a background, the final stages of her quest to define the nature of the essence of a human being draws readily on religious figures. But this is not sufficient to account for such a choice: religion never defined Stein as a person, nor as a writer.

Stein was Jewish, her surname would have easily given her away; she was also a homosexual and had never made too much of an effort to disguise the nature of her relationship with Alice. In other words, her birth and conduct made her a particularly easy target during the years of the German occupation of France.[[232]](#footnote-232) In February 1943 Stein was visiting friends in Belley when Maurice Sivain, previously Sous-Prefet of the town but who was now working in Vichy, send Gertrude and Alice a message: ‘…they must leave at once for Switzerland, tomorrow if possible, otherwise they will be put in a concentration camp’.[[233]](#footnote-233) It was not the first time the couple was advised to flee France and get back to the United States. And yet despite long discussions and much deliberation, neither of them ever was able to come to a decision. In the end, despite the risks, they decided to stay:

No, I am not going we are not going, it is better to go regularly wherever we are sent than to go irregularly where nobody can help us if we are in trouble […] They are always trying to get us to leave France, but we are here to stay.[[234]](#footnote-234)

One could interpret these words as the product of either a very logic or very irrational mind. But certainly, Stein was fully aware of what was at stake, and yet remained defiant, her faith in ‘logic’ unscathed. She did not write any play in 1942. I am not therefore suggesting that Stein introduced religious figures in her theatrical writings following some sort of urge triggered by such dramatic circumstances; indeed, it seems unlikely that Stein would incorporate religious references into her work purely for aesthetic reasons. I am inclined to believe that Saints were to Stein a means to communicate to her audience that after decades of relentless experimentation trying to ‘tell’ and ‘portray’ the human essence, she had come to the conclusion that the closest anyone could come to grasp it was through instinct, or a ‘leap of faith’. Art could not actually grasp it, but could prove its existence by occasionally managing to ferry across to the audience through the eye of a sitter, through a poignant sentence, a whiff of immortality; sometimes art managed to insinuate in the subconscious of the public that after all, maybe this life is not just *it*, because if humans are mortal, their essence is not. All that art could finally do was to point the way in which to look, to supply the tools through which human nature could be observed.

Actors are the tools through which a theatrical piece can exist, and we have seen how Stein was troubled by the disparity of tempos between what goes on on-stage and what goes on in the audience’s inner sphere. At the theatre there are really three lives that go on existing contemporarily: the actor’s own, the one of the character being interpreted, and the spectator’s. It is the character’s made-up life, not the actor’s real one that affects the spectator at the theatre. It is interesting to note that the only one being ‘honest’ is the character: the actor is pretending to be someone else, and the spectator is putting himself in the position to be moved, or thrilled, or scared by something that he knows is unreal. In most theories of theatre, this psychological predisposition plays an important role in the theatrical experience. People going to the theatre need to want to *believe* in whatever will be brought in front of their eyes as if in some sort of collective hypnosis. A leap of faith is required to the audience. There is a covenant between actors and spectators: we will tell you a story, and you will believe it. The timings of the play are not set by the public; control is taken away from the public and all they can do is to wait for the darkness to descend in the room and for the show to begin. Stein of course rejected all this; she did not want control to be taken away from the audience; she wanted to create harmony between the spectators’ lives and what went on on-stage. I believe Stein realized that she could take advantage of the public’s psychological disposition, seeing in it a crack in the cynical armor most people wear so that through that crack they could gain a glimpse of their human essence on stage.

This helps us answer the question ‘why Saints?’ Saints in Christian doctrine abandon their lives and worldly aspirations to follow their Creator’s will; they are always pointing at something else and beyond. Saints call themselves out from the theatre of the world, in which identities are traded in the public sphere. Saints are actual; by having rejected all things secular they transcend the barriers of time, they are white pages written by God, slithers of his own existence. As such, rather than being rooted into the era they were living, they float through time. And when Stein places them on stage, rather than becoming fixed figures, they wear light, almost intangible costumes that float and whirl as they jump and run on stage. By relating to them the audience relates with God; they realize that they too are slivers of God’s existence. As the mirror reflects a ray of light, so the actors impersonating the Saints have the role of not absorbing the spectator’s attention, but of deflecting it toward something else and beyond. This concept of ‘self-abnegation’ was picked up on by Virgil Thompson, for artistic reasons. In March 1933 he had been so impressed by the musical *Run, little Chillun* with its totally African-American staff that he told Van Vechten: ‘I am going to have *Four Saints* sung by Negros. They alone possess the dignity and the poise, the lack of self -consciousness that proper interpretation of the opera demands. They have the rich resonant voices essential to the singing of my music and the clear enunciation required to deliver Gertrude’s text.’[[235]](#footnote-235) Stein was not too convinced about this idea, but in a letter of 30 May 1933 he wrote: ‘the Negro bodies, if seen at all, would only be divined vaguely through long dresses. The movements would be sedate and prim, and the transparence is aimed primarily not at titillating the audience with the sight of a leg but at keeping the texture of the stage as light as possible… My Negro singers, after all, are a purely musical desideratum because of their rhythm, their style and especially their diction.’ [[236]](#footnote-236)

Their bodies, their appearance was not important. Thomson needed their voices and their suave movements to be suggestive of a lighter, higher, sphere of being, similar to the one in which the Saints were moving in: bursting with joy and innocence. In *Four Saints* both Stein’s words and Thomson’s music recreate a playful exhilarated atmosphere. Paul Wittke (longtime chief music editor at G. Schirmer, Inc.) wrote that: ‘There is no tension, conflict or evil in the opera. It is a carnival of childlike, not childish, religious mysticism by two supposedly non religious people.’[[237]](#footnote-237) It is not surprising then that its libretto has very little in common with others. The following extract is a typical sample, transcribed by Toklas from Stein’s manuscript:

SCENE V

Scene five Saint Therese had a father photographically.

Not a sister.

Saint Therese had no mother and no other appointed to

be left at hand.

Saint Therese famously and mind. To mind. To have to.

have to have have Helen. Saint Therese have to have Helen have to

have Helen. Saint Therese have to have to have to have Saint Therese

to have to have Helen. An excuse.

Saint Therese as well as that.

Saint Therese robin.

Saint Therese not attached to robin.

Saint Therese Robin not attached to Robin

Saint Therese Attached not attached to Robin

Saint Therese Why they could

Saint Therese Why they could why they could

Saint Therese Saint Therese Saint Therese Saint Therese

Ignatius why they could Saint Therese

Saint Ignatius why they could[[238]](#footnote-238)

The humor is evident, and so is the spirit of play that permeates Stein’s theatrical production. Paul Wittke wrote about ‘the feeling of a constant interior movement of happiness:…the saints are bubbling over with life, having a grand time’[[239]](#footnote-239), while Norman Weinstein noted that: *Four Saints* is a circus [though] we are confronted not by performing clowns but by talking saints.’[[240]](#footnote-240) Thornton Wilder wrote:

[One] reason that renders this style difficult to many readers proceeds from the author’s humor…Miss Stein has always place much emphasis on the spirit of the play in an artist’s work. The reward of difficult thinking is an inner exhilaration. Here is delight in words and in the virtuosity of using them exactly; here is wit; here is mockery at the predecessors who approached these matters with so cumbrous a solemnity.[[241]](#footnote-241)

Stein writes that after she saw the pictures of the little girl gradually transformed in a nun, she understood how ‘everything was actual**’**. The pictures captured moments (immortalised) and saved them from the everlasting flow of life. It would have been physically possible to set the first and last picture of the series side by side. In this way the continuity of life between the two stages would have become apparent, instinctively graspable. Stein wanted to give to her audience the chance to go a step further, by putting on stage a kinematic version of her own experience, through her plays.

**The Last Play**

Stein was dying with cancer as she composed her last play *The Mother of Us All.* It premiered 10 months after her death. It is therefore apt in my opinion to consider this piece as Stein’s testament. In her usual defiant way, she places in the title of what she must have been aware would have been her last writing the word ‘mother’. It is hard to imagine a stronger image to oppose to the imminent fate awaiting her. After her years spent in experimenting with language and challenging the most engrained beliefs and rules about literature and its ability to grasp the essence of a human being, Stein prepared herself at this crucial point in life to face and break the last taboo, death itself. In the closing lines of *The Mother of Us All* Stein brings the afterlife itself on stage, through Susan B’s words as a ghost. Susan B returns from the dead to witness the realization of women’s right to vote; a cause she had fought for all her life. When she returns, she also finds out that a memorial statue had been erected in her honor to recognise her efforts. It is from behind this statue that Susan’s voice rises to deliver the play’s finale:

We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards. We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but.

(A silence a long silence)

But – we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, and here, here we are here, in marble and gold, did I say gold, yes I said gold, in marble and gold and where –

(A silence)

Where is where. In my long life of effort and strife, dear life, life is strife, in my long life, it will not come and go, I tell you so, it will stay it will pay but

(Along silence)

But do I want what we have got, has it not gone, what made it live, has it not gone because now it is had, in my long life in my long life.

(Silence)

Life is strife. I was a martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done.

(Silence)

Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know

(Silence)

My long life, my long life. [[242]](#footnote-242)

Stein’s last words are addressed to her contemporaries, to her audience. In this closing speech, Stein worries one last time about her ability to have made herself understood by her public (‘Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know’); she wonders if what has been achieved will survive her or if it will be washed away once ‘what made it live’ has gone; she begs her audience not to forget all the struggles she had faced during her long life. The anxiety is palpable. The imminence of death makes the recognition of her lifelong struggle more of a priority than what has actually been achieved. The turning to words like ‘gold’ and ‘marble’ to describe Susan B’s statue gives to this piece an even more visionary and dream-like texture; the text suggests a writer aching with the knowledge that if there will ever be a recognition for her ‘life’s strife’, it will be a posthumous one.

This ‘curtain call’ speech contains many echoes – Prospero’s farewell; the Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo*; even Eliot. It also seems fitting should echo the closing line of *The Great Gatsby*, a masterpiece of nostalgia. It is the final passage when Nick returns to visit Gatsby’s once dazzling and now decrepit household and is hit by the momentous realisation of the desperation Gatsby must have felt as his dream was slipping from his fingers:

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

On March 4, 1951, Alice B Toklas wrote an article on *The New York Times* about the couple’s relationship with Fitzgerald. He had been presented to them in 1921 by Hemingway and both Stein and Toklas immediately took on him:

He was my favorite among the young American writers whom we knew. His intelligence, sensibility, distinction, wit and charm made his contemporaries appear commonplace and lifeless.[[243]](#footnote-243)

About Fitzgerald’s novel she writes

It must have been in 1921 that we first read “This Side of Paradise” and very shortly after reread it and every few years read it anew. […] Then for us there was a considerable silence from the young author. We saw none of the short stories in the magazines until one day “The Great Gatsby” flashed upon us. The promise of the first novel of the so greatly gifted young writer was fulfilled

It is at least plausible that Stein would have had this particular piece of literature in her mind while writing Susan B’s speech. The association might have also been triggered by the memory of their last emotional meeting with the Fitzgeralds, in meeting in which Zelda appears as an anxious revenant concerned with her life in memory:

The last time we saw him was in Baltimore in 1934. […] He was restless, ordered tea early and had Scottie, his young daughter, sent for. “Have a canape,” he said, “they were especially made for you, like those we used to have in Paris, made especially for you both, and ‘Tender Is the Night’ for Zelda.” Always now I remember him as he was at that moment, poignant, disturbing and ineffably beautiful. We stayed on to see Mrs. Fitzgerald. It was late when she came suddenly, noiselessly and rapidly into the room. She was no longer the vigorous, smart young woman we had known in Paris. Now she was thin, eerie and fey. Fitzgerald unfolded the drawings and paintings she had been encouraged to make, now that she was no longer allowed or able to dance. They were both pleased when Gertrude Stein said that she thought her work interesting and quite well worth while continuing. This encouragement brought forth from Zelda a hesitant but not shy, “Would you choose the one you prefer? I would like you to have it. Then you will not forget us.” That was the last time we were to meet either of them.

By looking both towards the struggles of the past and towards the hope of recognition in the future, Susan B’s speech is the perfect epitaph to Stein’s career. In a way, we could consider it an embodiment of the continuous present she strived at conceiving all her life. Alfa and Omega finally become one. On the same page, in the same scene, Susan B, now a ghost, by definition freed from the realm of time, both contemplates her mortal life and expresses her anxieties for the future. Not even the brutal definitive ‘thereness’ of the marble and gold statue can put an end to the ceaseless flow of existence. Even after Susan B’s features are forever cast in stone, and even after her lifelong battle is finally over, even after death, her essence, her ghost does not cease existing and evolving.

In *Tender Buttons’*s closing lineStein hinted at the ceaseless flowing of time through her evocation of the fountain, an image which could be associated with male reproductive power; in *The Mother of Us All* Stein drops the metaphors and makes of the word ‘mother’, so simple and so bare, a vessel to which in the end, the creation of that ungraspable human quidity is entrusted. The ‘mother’ is the visible starting point of a new life. The life she carries in her womb is a perfect example of a ‘whole that is more than the sum of its parts’. Stein in her last words as a writer, point towards this disarming truth.

**Afterword: Stein and Puppetry**

Alice B. Toklas wrote about Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*:

The book was impressive not only because it was the accomplished first effort of a very young man but because he had given us the complete picture of his generation, a surprisingly new and different generation and to many of us it remains the definitive portrait and continues to surprise us. Is not this surprise one of the proofs of its being a work of art?[[244]](#footnote-244)

Surprise is at the centre of Stein’s artwork, for all that she is famous for repetition. Betsy Alaine Ryan notes that 1913 saw Georges Braque painting *Le Courrier*, a milestone in the development of cubism; Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* was first performed causing upheaval; Stein wrote her first play:

While we have since grown accustomed to such innovations in painting and music – arts which integrate themselves quickly into the cultural fabric by virtue of their concreteness – Stein’s equally innovative creations in literature and theatre continue to hit us with the force of the strange and unexpected.[[245]](#footnote-245)

Stein’s drama with its visionary intent to embody the ‘now’ and to be part of the continuously flowing cloth of life, constitutes a fertile ground on which contemporary dramaturgy can experiment with the creation of live theatre. The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre (GSRT) was founded in 1990 to support and promote innovation in the performing arts. Its mission statement includes the following:

We believe that an entire genre of literature, developed by visionaries of the late 19th and 20th centuries and often referred to as ‘difficult’ or ‘problematic’, was written for stages and production techniques that had not yet been developed at the time that they were conceived. Stein’s repetition, Joyce’s sentences, Proust’s imagery, and Jarry’s philosophies not only prompt readers to rethink the function of language, they also demand that the artists who explore them re-examine the very foundations of traditional dramatic communication – including the vehicle for presentation.[[246]](#footnote-246)

In order to stage Stein’s and others’ plays, the GSRT avails itself of the latest media technologies:

To advance its creative work GSRT has conducted a wide range of research and workshop activities that are facilitated and enhanced by advanced Internet, film, and theater technologies. Activities are designed to enable traditional artists from a variety of media, including theater artists around the globe, to interact on cross-cultural, inter-media projects. […]

GSRT is also applying the potential of digital technologies to theatrical education for students of all ages and the preservation and dissemination of new and innovative work.[[247]](#footnote-247)

Their state-of-the-art approach in staging Stein’s plays also offers a very interesting ‘third way’ (‘digital puppetry’) that could help finding an answer to the dispute amongst critics on whether or not Stein conceived her drama with the intention for it to be performed:

Our work with computer artists and programmers, in conjunction with our work with artists from diverse cultures has led to the evolution of an entirely new approach to representing characters on stage, which for lack of any pre-existing words to describe it, we refer to as ‘digital puppetry’. Digital puppets integrate live, digital and animated elements into the creation of a single character. They were the focus of the 1998 UBU Project which was the first phase involved in creating characters using live ‘layering’ techniques. It was also the first step in the extended process we have developed for realizing Gertrude Stein’s The Making of Americans on stage. These technologies have great potential for application to classics in modern Western theatrical literatures that resist production using traditional theater techniques.[[248]](#footnote-248)

Digital puppets instead of flesh and bones actors could be the answer to Stein’s dilemma when it came to the public being able to connect immediately with the characters on stage, as soon as the curtains opened. Digital puppets do move on stage, but as empty vessels, they do not have a past. They are created in front of the public’s eye at the moment of the performance. Like the magpies, they do add space and depth to the stage; but unlike actors they do not have an inner rhythm of their own. Their emptiness and ghostlike appearance allows the audience to ‘enter them’ and look through them so that the play itself, rhythm itself, movement itself becomes part of the public’s own the reality.

Could Stein have imagined such a scenario? We simply cannot telland yet we know of her ‘affair’ with marionettes. It all started on 30th November 1934. Stein was in Chicago in occasion of her lecture tour of the United States. As she was walking down Michigan Avenue, a young man approached her; his name was Donald B. Vestal, and this fortuitous encounter would change his life forever. Vestal was running the only gallery in Chicago to handle modern art and he was feeling claustrophobic about the lack of truly mould-breaking artists in the area. In his attempts at getting at modern art, he had started working with puppets and he felt as if ‘there was something in them after all’; after meeting Stein he felt sure she could help him finding out what that ‘something’ was. Vestal felt that puppet performance was close to become a legitimate modern art form; however its potential was hindered by the lack of a dedicated style of writing. Vestal had a specific kind of writing in mind:

‘As yet a perfect style of writing for them has not been devised. It shall be as stenographic as the short steps they must take to keep proportions’[[249]](#footnote-249)

In his letters to Stein he explains why he so firmly believes that puppets need a voice of their own:

The voice and the words [the marionette] delivers are more important than keen manipulation because a marionette fascinates whether or not the action at any given point is the one planned on - the word and the manner of its sounding are paramount therefore.[[250]](#footnote-250)

Vestal is saying that the marionette itself, its physical appearance, its mere existence is something that fascinates the public a priori; therefore the marionette’s speech needs to be delivered in a powerful way in order to touch the audience and break through its fascination for the marionette’s appearance. We know that Stein believed something similar about actors: their physical presence on stage had the potential to deflect the public’s attention from the plot, from what it was being said on stage, to the specific characters they played:

There need be no personages in a play because if there are then you do not forget their names. And if you do not forget their names you put their names down each time they are to say something. The result of which is that a play finishes.[[251]](#footnote-251)

In other words, as we have already seen, Stein was concerned that the conscious efforts needed on the audience’s behalf to identify themselves with the various characters on stage in order to follow the plot, would constitute a hindrance to the creation of that steady flow between what was going on inside each member of the audience, their inner sphere, and what was been ‘portrayed’ on stage, the outer sphere. The names of the different characters are seen by Stein as obstacles impeding the play to flow, rather than the *fil rouge* keeping the play together.

It is thus easy to see why Stein wholeheartedly accepted Vestal’s challenge to create a ‘perfect style of writing for them’. Marionettes are not ‘characters’ as such, but rather the personification of a set of characteristics, embodying universal human traits; they never evolve, they never learn, they never grow old. Success in providing puppets with a modern text would mean to free them from the centuries old clichés of ‘forever kicking each other’, and at the same time to legitimate them to be used as main actors in plays aimed at an adult audience. As Vestal puts it

You [are] the one person who could preeminently write a play for marionettes, in a manner that [has] never before been devised, that would suit marionettes as they have never before been suited. [...] No one has written for marionettes since Maeterlinck’s Death of Tintagiles and I would like the next person to be an American writing for American marionettes.[[252]](#footnote-252)

As we have seen, Stein gladly accepted the challenge.

As she embarked on this task, she was working on *The or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind,* a collection of meditations upon the differences between the two spheres of human existence she labeled as ‘Human Nature’ and ‘Human Mind’. Stein sees Human Nature as ‘not interesting’ and ordinary. Relating to mundane concerns such as society, memory, government, history. Human Nature is time-bound and limited. Interestingly, Human Nature is also concerned with the question of identity, a question that Stein tries to get at through puppets:

Marionette.

Is a marionette a Punch and Judy show and suddenly how to know that Punch and Judy are their names.

But Stein quickly dismisses the matter of Identity as unimportant and lowly: ‘I am I because my little dog knows me’. When even a dog can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ the matter of identity can’t be a crucial one. As Charles Bernstein points out, for Stein identity is not innate and a-temporal; it’s merely an acting out and not an inner state.[[253]](#footnote-253) There is nothing eternal or extraordinary in identity.

Human Mind however is genius; it is timeless, boundless, connected with the universe; masterpieces, landscapes and, of course, plays (Human Mind finds its best expression through writing, which happens to be Stein’s field). Plays – her plays, especially the ones without beginnings, endings or characters – become for Stein a link between the two entities: they are the expression of the Human mind, but they ‘feel like’ Human Nature.

By 9th September 1935 Stein had sent to Vestal her reworking of the play – like sections of *The Geographical History of America*, which she entitled *Identity A Poem.* He was enthusiastic about it and wrote back to her saying that it sounded like ‘delightful marionette material’[[254]](#footnote-254). Vestal started immediately visualizing the script as a puppets show with two main characters (plus a dog puppet) who ‘can talk back and forth, [...] identical figures representing one character tossing a soliloquy between them, on the subject of consciousness and identity and the hows and whys of recognition.’[[255]](#footnote-255) Vestal not only directed the rehearsals of ‘Identity or, I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me’, he also decided what the puppets were to look like:

The main characters were two silver-colored marionettes representing Human Mind and Human Nature[…] The two puppets are quite similar, but Human Nature features a skeleton rib cage, and has no facial features, while in contrast, Human Mind has eyes, nose, mouth, and a full body, no doubt a reflection of the earthbound mortality of Stein’s Human Nature, versus the completeness of Human Mind. Both figures floated in space, never touching ground. There were also a female marionette figure named “Possibly a Woman,” and a male marionette called “I am I, a Man.” Additionally, the show included two almost identical portrait marionettes of Stein, each one seated on a chair at a little desk suspended in the air. One was “Gertrude Stein, Herself” and the other, which grasped a pen in its right hand, was “Gertrude Stein, a Playwright.” Two Modigliani-like busts with leaf-like hair simply sat on the stage, with no strings attached. These were The Chorus. And finally, there was the Little Dog which, although no photographic record of it seems to exist, quite likely was also a marionette.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Unfortunately no records have survived of the actual performance. We don’t know how the music sounded, or how the scenography looked, but we do know that the premier in Detroit on 9th July 1936, held in occasion of the First American Puppetry Conference and Festival, was a success:

That evening, in the same auditorium, the anxiously awaited world premiere of Gertrude Stein’s newest play, *Identity, or I am because my Little Dog Knows Me*, was accomplished by Don Vestal and his associates from Chicago. As musical commentary on the play, the talented young Chicago composer, Owen Haynes, executed with virtuosity his clever and robust score at the piano. The diction of the puppeteers was especially fine; Rita Smith, the soprano, enunciated clearly in the most difficult quick passages of her songs,–which could be heard, even from behind curtains. Few opera singers match such a feat. The audience was vastly amused by the play, by puppets which came and went, or floated through the air, in Einsteinian parallels to Stein’s words, and encored the whole performance.[[257]](#footnote-257)

*Identity* has been performed only twice but what matters is the fact that Stein was prepared to explore puppetry as part of her quest to find the perfect means to express the ‘essence of a human being’ (which we can now call ‘Human Mind’) and that half a century after her death, thanks to a technology that had yet to be invented when she was alive, producers have managed to create the perfect substitute for theatrical actors. George Bernard Shaw in 1949 had foreseen such a scenario, and not at all in auspicious terms. He worried that cinema and TV might corrupt the ‘idiosyncratic puppet charm’:

I can imagine the puppets simulating living performers so perfectly that the spectators will be completely illuded. The result would be the death of puppetry; for it would lose its charm with its magic. So let reformers beware.[[258]](#footnote-258)

TV may have associated puppetry with younger audiences, but it is safe to say that puppets retain their uncanniness, as films like *Being John Malkovich* (1999) suggest. The fascination they exercise, as Harold B. Segel writes, can be related both to a primordial urge to master life, to play god, and to an obsession with our own image that finds its expression in portraiture, photography and statues.[[259]](#footnote-259)

**The Last Play again**

In the closing scene of *The Mother of Us All,* a statue of Susan B dominates the stage. The statue is to be unveiled and as the various characters gather around it for the ceremony, Susan’s ghost enters the scene and leaves. Once the ceremony is over and everybody has left, the statue of Susan B starts singing ‘Life is strife, I was a martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done.’ Stein died ten months before *The Mother of Us All* premiered, and it is easy to see why many take these words as her last public utterance. They seem to suggest that by the end of her long artistic journey, centered trying to grasp the essence of a human being and then replicating on stage the moment of connection between human beings, Stein had come to the conclusion that the visible world, the world that could be experienced through physical perception, constituted a hindrance to rather than a facilitation of her aim. Stein did seem to leave this world aware of an ultimate failure in her project. But as I have suggested, her struggle and devotion to the ‘now’ lives on in today’s ultramodern forms of theatre and

Edmund Wilson wrote about Stein:

Most of us balk at her soporific rigmaroles, her echolaliac incantations, her half-witted-sounding catalogues on numbers; most of us read her less and less. Yet, remembering especially her early work, we are still always aware of her presence in the background of contemporary literature— and we picture her as the great pyramidal Buddha of Jo Davidson’s statue of her, eternally and placidly ruminating the gradual developments of the process of being, registering the vibrations of a psychological country like some august human seismograph whose charts we haven’t the training to read. [[260]](#footnote-260)

Yet, I would like to add.

**Stein and the Internet**

James noticed how similar the visual process of the blind and the sighted was, in that they both have to concentrate their attention onto one small detail at the time in order to form an abstract idea of the wider space in front of them:

It might be supposed that a knowledge of space acquired by so many successive discreet acts would always retain a somewhat jointed and so to speak, granulated character. When we who are gifted with sight think of a space too large to come into a single view, we are apt to imagine it as composite, and filled with more or less jerky stoppings and startings … or else we reduce the scale symbolically and imagine how much larger on a map the distance would look than others with whose totality we are familiar…. Be this as it may, however, the space which each blind man feels to extend beyond his body is felt by him *as one smooth continuum – all trace of those muscular startings and stoppings and reversal which presided over its formation having been eliminated from the memory*.[[261]](#footnote-261)

What happens if we swap the term ‘space’ with ‘cyberspace’? This is a question one might ask to bring into focus a tendency which takes as its origin the late nineteenth-century disaggregation and re-integration of technology (as in the cinema).[[262]](#footnote-262) Internet users will probably find that the cognitive process described by James fully applies to their own when faced with an intimidatingly vast array of information relating to a particular subject they wish to research. There will have to be a lot of false starts; there will be a lot of stops to peruse information which will mostly have to be discarded as spurious, and lots of reversals when one goes back to a previously visited site having now gained knowledge on the subject being researched and therefore being now able to differentiate between what is important and what can be disregarded. Interestingly, once the knowledge has been gained, not only will the majority of the sites visited be forgotten, but also the information newly acquired, according to a recent research by Columbia University psychologist Betsy Sparrow. Sparrow posits that the Internet (research engines such as Google in particular) and computers are changing the very nature of our memory:

Since the advent of search engines, we are reorganizing the way we remember things […] Our brains rely on the Internet for memory in much the same way they rely on the memory of a friend, family member or co-worker. We remember less through knowing information itself than by knowing where the information can be found.[[263]](#footnote-263)

The researchers suggest that the Internet has started acting as a sort of ‘transactive memory’ which we rely upon to store information for us. The study found that when people are asked difficult questions, they begin thinking of computers, instead of an answer. Furthermore, if participants knew that the answer to a question was available on the Internet, they were more likely to recall where it was stored rather than the answer itself.

As Annette Rubery[[264]](#footnote-264) has implied, the Internet with its a-spacial, atemporal and self-referential status could be seen as incarnating one aspect of Stein’s continuous present. Indeed the cognitive processes of startings and stoppings and recursion described by James captures the process necessary to approach any of Gertrude Stein’s works. When after an often colossal effort one manages to extrude a meaning from Stein’s words and in turn tries to convey that meaning, it will be with difficulty that one will be able to do so using Stein’s exact words. Instead one will recur to one’s own set of words to convey the final meaning and there will be no mention of the tribulations inflicted by what sometimes appear to be Stein’ maieutic pedagogy.

Stein was forever posing questions. We have seen extracts from her lectures in which she constantly addresses her audience through questions such as :’do you see what I mean’ ‘Do you understand’. Stein often asks questions and leaves the answer open:

A great many think that they know confusion when they know or see it or hear it, but do they. A thing that seems very clear but is it. A thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it.[[265]](#footnote-265)

Stein’s famous last words to Alice B. Toklas were ‘What is the answer?’. When Alice did not reply she said ‘Then what is the question?’ A constant questioning is perhaps Stein’s most characteristic feature both as a human being and as an artist. Why, Stein asks us, do we see the world the way we do? Why do we use these particular words to describe and to relate to this world. Why I am who I am? What makes me myself?. Rubery offers an explicit parallel between the continuous present and the internet:

That the Internet is partly responsible for our so-called ‘incredulity of metanarratives’ is beyond question. The hall-of-mirrors reality of the information superhighway offers us such a diverse range of cultural experience, that one cannot help but question the validity of a single, overarching notion of history. The on-line environment, often termed VR or Virtual-Reality, does not exist in any physical space; it transcends time and offers no organic, coherent sense of the past. As such it also has something in common with Stein’s ‘continuous present’.

She goes on to note that the cybernauts’ journey towards knowledge is similar to the cognitive process of the human mind in that ‘There is no set narrative or linear journey through the web because the links allow users (or cybernauts) to choose an infinite number of paths--a method that was in fact modelled on the cognitive processes of the human mind.’ Rubery concludes by affirming that Stein would have embraced the Internet eagerly and I share her view. However speculative that may be, it is possible to label Stein’s later works and especially her plays as representative of a new technological regime, and thus as forerunners of later forms of nonlinear communication such as those to be found on the Internet.

**APPENDIX I**

**TENDER BUTTONS TABLE**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **VISUAL COMPONENTS** | **FEELINGS** | **MUSIC** | | **MOVEMENT** |
| **OBJECTS** | | | | | |
| 1 | Blind Spectacle Color | Hurt | |  |  |
| 2 | Red glittering color showed | Gratitude  Mercy | |  | Change x 2 |
| 3 | Color  Shows x 3  White black pink  Sight x 2 red see light blue purple | Pleasure  Hurt | | Singing | Change x 5 |
| 4 | Redness  Eye  White  See  Green | Painful | |  | Comes out of |
| 5 | Image  Yellow  Whiter  Color  Sight x 3  Show  Rose-wood color  See | Pleasure | |  |  |
| 6 | Color  Darker  See | Mercy | | Melody | Spread |
| 7 | Red  Rose |  | |  | Change |
| 8 | Color  Grey |  | | Loud  Loud clash |  |
| 9 | Black silver | Desperate  Feeling  Resignation | |  |  |
| 10 | Lily  White |  | | Noise |  |
| 11 | See  Shows  Brown  Sick color  Grey  Red  White  Yellow  Dust color  Spark  Brighter |  | |  | Wedding journey  Circulating  An increase |
| 12 | Colored  Blue  Green  Color  Shown  White  Show | sad | | song | Starting  Coming  Change |
| 13 | Color  Discolor  Black |  | | Melodiously |  |
| 14 | Dark  White  Red  Black  Yellow  Green  Blue  Pink  Scarlet  Color |  | | Crackle | Current  Wind |
| 15 | Dark grey  Red |  | |  |  |
| 16 | Blue  Color |  | |  | Guided away x 3 |
| 17 | Color x 4  Dark |  | | Piano | Speed  Acted  Spread x 2 |
| 18 | Shows  Showing  Spectacle  Darkness | Hope | |  | Action  Bloom |
| 19 | Shown | Frightful | |  |  |
| 20 | Green  Straw color  Seen  Showed |  | |  |  |
| 21 | Seeing  Show  Showed  Shows |  | |  | Come there |
| 22 | Shows |  | |  | Spreading |
| 23 | White  Red  Colored  Color |  | |  |  |
| 24 | Yellow | Enthusiastically hurting | |  |  |
| 25 | Show |  | |  |  |
| 26 | Color |  | |  |  |
| 27 | Blind | Agitation | |  |  |
| 28 | Shows  Show x 3 |  | |  | Change  Water |
| 29 | Show  Eyesight |  | |  |  |
| 30 | Show |  | |  |  |
| 31 |  | Astonishing | |  | Water |
| 32 | Yellow |  | |  |  |
| 33 |  |  | |  |  |
| 34 | Coloring |  | |  |  |
| 35 | Light white  Rosy |  | |  |  |
| 36 | Dark | Frantic sullenness | |  | Glide  Change x 2 |
| 37 |  |  | | Pleasant |  |
| 38 | Shining  Yellow  Color | Hope | |  | Spread x 2 |
| 39 |  |  | |  | Come in |
| 40 |  | Worry | |  |  |
| 41 | Red  Rose  Pink |  | |  |  |
| 42 | Shows  Shining |  | |  |  |
| 43 | Colored  Show  Shows |  | |  |  |
| 44 | Light |  | |  |  |
| 45 | Brown |  | |  | Change |
| 46 | Shows  Blue  Green  White  Show  Sight | Hope | |  | Come  Widening |
| 47 |  | Reckless | |  |  |
| 48 | Looking glass |  | |  | Change  Shake |
| 49 | Rose  Red  Shows shine |  | |  | Stream |
| 50 |  |  | |  | Goes |
| 51 | White |  | |  |  |
| 52 |  |  | |  |  |
| 53 | Blackening  White |  | |  | Go |
| 54 | Red | hurt | |  |  |
| 55 | White  Rose  Green  Colored  Grey | Hope | |  |  |
| 56 |  |  | |  |  |
| 57 | Black  Brown |  | |  |  |
| 58 |  |  | | Onomatopoeic |  |
| **FOOD** | | | | | |
| 59 | Reddening  Yellow  Shine  White  Red  Show  Darkening  Black  Color  Shows  Eye  Sight  Green  Darker  Redder  Lilacs | Feeling x 7  Felt  Hope x 5  Pleasure  Sadder | Singing  To make a sound x 5 | | In the inside In the outside  Change x 2  Changing  Hurry |
| 60 | Light  Pink  Eye glass x 2  Shiny  Darkness  Dark darkness  See  Show  Shows | Suffer  Merciful  Hates  Pain | Mixed music | | Change x 2  Water x 2 |
| 61 | Shining x 2  Show  Brown is a color  Colored  Grey  Color x 2  White  Green | Hopes  Joy  Hurt x 5 |  | | Change  Final change  Changes  Water  Action  Spread |
| 62 | Eye glasses  Blind | hurts | Noise | | Water x 4  Continuing a change  Canoe  Widening |
| 63 | See  Seen  Yellow color  Coloring | suffering |  | | climbing |
| 64 | White  Colored  Showing  Seen eye holders  Dark red |  |  | | Constant Increase  Change |
| 65 | Sight |  |  | | Climb up x 2 |
| 66 | White x 3 | Harm x2 | sound | | Boat |
| 67 | Colored  Seen x2 |  |  | | Change |
| 68 |  | Joy x 2 |  | |  |
| 69 | White  Shows  Yellow  Green | Nervous |  | | Kite  Skate  A spool |
| **70** | Candle  Shows |  | Musical memory | |  |
| 71 |  |  |  | |  |
| 72 | Sight  Painted |  | noisy | |  |
| 73 | Dark  Yellow  Grren  White |  |  | | In went  We came back  In beginning  Change |
| 74 |  |  |  | | Seeding |
| 75 |  |  |  | |  |
| 76 |  |  |  | | Preparation x 3 |
| 77 |  |  |  | |  |
| 78 |  |  |  | |  |
| 79 | Show it x 2  I spy  Sight  White |  |  | | Swelled stretch |
| 80 | Eyelets |  |  | | Development |
| 81 | Red |  |  | | Decline x 2  Change |
| 82 | Green |  | Onomatopoeic | |  |
| 83 |  |  |  | | Washing x 3 |
| 84 | Red |  | Scream | | A crescent |
| 85 |  |  |  | | Hurry you up |
| 86 |  |  | Bell  Onomatopoeic | | The coach |
| 87 |  |  |  | | Bird |
| 88 |  |  | Onomatopoeic | | Bird |
| 89 |  |  |  | | Go |
| 90 |  |  | Onomatopoeic | | Succession |
| 91 |  |  | Onomatopoeic | | Boats |
| 92 |  |  | Onomatpoeic | | Cutting |
| 93 | Red  Specs |  |  | |  |
| 94 |  |  |  | | Hop |
| 95 | Red  White |  |  | | Go  Widening |
| 96 | See  White |  | Ear  Bell | | Wheel |
| 97 |  |  |  | | Dining |
| 98 |  |  | Noise  Onomatopoeic | | Stretches  Leap |
| 99 | Stare  Show |  |  | | Succession  Come |
| 100 |  |  |  | | Winning |
| 101 |  |  |  | |  |
| 102 |  |  | Onomatopoeic | |  |
| 103 | Show  See |  |  | |  |
| 104 |  |  | Onomatopoeic | |  |
| 105 |  |  |  | | Build |
| 106 |  | Pain | Onomatopoeic | | Go x2 |
| 107 | Red |  |  | |  |
| 108 | Red |  |  | | Carriage  Go away |
| 109 |  |  |  | |  |
| **ROOMS** | | | | | |
| 110 | Showed  Shining  Black  Seen  Eye glasses  Color  Pink  White  Red  Looking |  | Tune x 2  Ears  Sound x 2  Music | | Act  Action  Preparing  Fast  Change x 11  Spread  Lifting  The truth has come  Entering  Comes x2  Swelling  Growth  Changing  Speed  A speech showed  Motion x 2  Water  Movement  Moving  Rain  A scene  Stream  Current x 2  Dance  Fountain |

**Appendix II**

**‘WHAT HAPPENED A PLAY’**

*‘’What Happened a Play’’*

A tiger a rapt and surrounded overcoat securely arranged with spots old enough to be thought useful and witty quite witty in a secret and in a blinding flurry.

ACT TWO

(Three)

Four and nobody wounded, five and nobody flourishing, six and nobody talkative, eight and nobody sensible.

One and a left hand lift that is so heavy that there is no way of pronouncing perfectly.

A point of accuracy, a point of a strange stove, a point that is so sober that the reason left is all the chance of swelling.

(The same three)

A wide oak a wide enough oak, a very wide cake, a lightning cooky, a single wide open and exchanged box filled with the same little sac that shines.

The best the only better and more left footed stranger.

The very kindness there is in all lemons oranges apples pears and potatoes.

(The same three.)

A same frame a sadder portal, a singular gate and a bracketed mischance.

A rich market where there is no memory of more moon that there is everywhere and yet where strangely there is apparel and a whole set.

A connection, a clam cup connection, a survey, a ticket and a return to laying over.

ACT THREE

(Two)

A cut, a cut is not a slice, what is the occasion for representing a cut and a slice. What is the occasion for all that.

A cut is a slice, a cut is the same slice. The reason that a cut is a slice is that if there is no hurry any time is just as useful.[[266]](#footnote-266)

**Appendix III**

**PLAYS REFERRED TO IN THE LECTURE ‘PLAYS’**

The excerpts of plays that follow are the ones Stein chose to include in the lecture *Plays* in order to clarify the concept of landscape play (it is necessary to quote these examples at some length):

MARIUS I am very pleased I am indeed very pleased that it is a great pleasure.

MARTHA If four are sitting at table and one of them is lying upon it it does not make any difference. If bread and pomegranates are on a table and four are sitting at the table and one of them is leaning upon it it does not make any difference

MARTHA It does not make any difference if four are seated at a table and one is leaning upon it.

MARYAS If five are seated at a table and there is bread on it and there are pomegranates on it and one of the five is leaning on the table it does not make any difference.

MARTHA If on a day that comes again and if we consider a day a week day it does come again if on a day that comes again and we consider every day to be a day that comes again it comes again the when accidentally when very accidentally every other day and every other day every other day and every other day that comes again and every day comes again, every other day comes again and every other and everyday comes again and accidentally and every day and it comes again, a day comes again and a day in that way comes again.

MARYAS Accidentally in the morning and after that every evening and accidentally every evening and after that every morning and after that accidentally every morning and after that accidentally and after that every morning.

MARYAS After that accidentally. Accidentally after that.

MARYAS Accidentally after that. After that accidentally.

MARYAS.

AND More Maryas and more Martha.

MARTHA.

MARYAS.

AND More and more and more Martha and more

MARYAS. Marayas.

MARIUS It is spoken of in that way.

MABEL. It is spoken of in that way.

MARIUS

AND It is spoken in that way and it is spoken of in that way.

MARIUS

AND It is spoken of in that way.

MABEL.

MABEL. I speak of it in that way.

MARIUS. I have spoken of it in that way and I speak it in that way. I have spoken of it in that way.

MABEL I speak of it in that way.[[267]](#footnote-267)

A few considerations can be garnered from this example: firstly, there are characters, but they are treated as nouns or objects: their names are followed by a full stop. We do not know who is pronouncing the words that follow. Secondly, to add to the confusion, sometimes the character ‘AND’ seems to say the words. Thirdly, repetition and circularity of time are key (if on a day that comes again…). Fourthly, we do not know what it is spoken about, and all we have for certain are the names of the ‘characters’. They function as the pillars that bear the weight of the play. The names are the landscape. Whatever is going on between them, it does not matter.

A second example:

SAY IT WITH FLOWERS

A PLAY

George Henry, Henry Henry and Elisabeth Henry.

Subsidiary characters.

Elisabeth and William Long.

Time Louis XI

Place Gisors.

Action in a cake shop and the sea shore.

Other interests.

The welcoming of a man and his dog and the wish that they

would come back sooner.

George Henry and Elisabeth Henry and Henry Henry

ruminating.

Elisabeth and William Long.

Waiting.

Who has asked them to be amiable to me.

She said she was waiting.

George Henry and Elisabeth Henry and Henry Henry.

Who might be asleep if they were not waiting for me.

She.

Elisabeth Henry and Henry Henry and George Henry.

She might be waiting with me.

Henry Henry absolutely ready to be here with me.

Scenery.

The home where they were waiting for William Long to ask them to come along and ask them not to be waiting for them.

Will they be asleep while they are waiting.

They will be pleased with everything.

What is everything.

A hyacinth is everything.

Will they be sleeping while they are waiting for everything.

William Long and Elisabeth Long were so silent you might have heard an egg shell breaking. They were busy all day long with everything.

Elisabeth and William Long were very busy waiting for him to come and bring his dog along.

Why did they not go with him.

Because they were busy waiting.[[268]](#footnote-268)

Again, a few comments can be made: the play is both a canovaccio and a screenplay (‘Action’). Movement is present throughout, with reference to actions but nothing really happening. People are waiting and wondering about other people waiting. Something has happened, or will happen, but all that matters is the time within the play.

A third example:

LOUIS XI AND MADAME GIRAUD

Scene II

Louis the XI loved a boat

A boat on the Seine

Sinks and leaves.

Leaves which have patterns.

They with delight.

Make it be loaned

To administer their confinement

They will go away

Without which it will matter.

Louis XI

Has won gold for France

And in this way.

He has settled she and a girl

He and a wife

He and a friend

They and their mother

The mother and the son Percy.[[269]](#footnote-269)

The following needs to be noted: firstly, the play includes a number of dissonances. There is only one scene and it is supposedly the second one; in the title there is an allusion to a Madame Giraud, but no mention of her in the play. No characters are clearly marked, in fact. There is little sense of action, and such elements of linkage that are present are provided by the pun (leaves) or grammatical parallelism.

Example four:

MADAME RECAMIER

Yvonne Marin

Out loud is when the mother wishes

When the brother fishes

When the father considers wishes

When the sister supposes wishes

She will change to say I say I say so.

Let her think of learning nothing.

Let her think of seeing everything.

Let her think like that.

Florence Descotes

Never to be restless

Never to be afraid

Never to ask will they come

Never to have made

Never to like having had

Little that is left then

She made it do

One and two

Thank her for everything.

Madame Recamier

It is not thoughtless to think well of them.

Louis Raynal.

A place where she sits

It is a place where they were.[[270]](#footnote-270)

A few elements of this example stand out: there 4 little stanzas each one introduced by a name of a character; there are no actions described or intended; and finally we are in the head of the characters: what we read is understood as a rendering of their thoughts, that is their inner movement.

By the time Stein was writing her lecture ‘Plays’, her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* was the only one to have been played (its first public performance took place in Hartford, Connecticut, on 8th of February 1934, and it opened in New York on the 20th . She saw the Opera later in Chicago during her lecture tour). This opera is crucial in Stein’s career as a playwright, as it is here that she gets closest to solving the two dilemmas of ‘still movement’ and of the necessity of ‘everything being actual’ on stage.

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1. Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935), 63. On the various incarnations of this lecture see Gregory Galligan, *The Cube in the Kaleidoscope: The American Reception of French Cubism 1918-1938* (New York: New York University Institute of Fine Arts, 2007), 79. Where possible the American lectures are cited from the widely-available anthology *Look at Me Now and Here I Am* (see n.4 below). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (London: Batsford, 1940), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle. Gertrude Stein & Company* (New York: Praeger,1974), 13ff; Galligan, *The Cube in the Kaleidoscope*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gertrude Stein, in *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz, intro. Elizabeth Sprigge (London: Penguin, 1971), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g. Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stein, *How Writing is Written*; cited in Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation, Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘When we who are gifted with sight think of a space too large to come into a single field of view, we are apt to imagine it as composite, and filled with more or less jerky stoppings and startings […], or else we reduce the scale symbolically and imagine how much larger on a map the distance would look than others with whose totality we are familiar.’ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), II 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007). John Middleton Muray’s *Rhythm* and the vitalism of Lawrence and others provide a general context. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gertrude Stein, ‘Portraits and Repetition’, in *Look at Me Now*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Portraits and Repetition’*,* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso: The Complete Writings*, ed. Edward Burns (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 79-80 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Under Hugo Munstenberg’ s direction Gertrude Stein collaborated in experiments in fatigue which were published as Leo Solomons and Gertrude Stein, ‘Normal Motor Automatism’, *Psychological Review* 5 (Sept. 1896). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Clive Bush, *Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James and Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Donald Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein. A Biography of Her Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cited in James R. Mellow, *The Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rosalind Miller, *Gertrude Stein, Form and Intelligibility* (New York: Exposition Press, 1949), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ‘The consciousness had become problematical but so far it had not been displaced as the central object of concern by the subconscious or by behaviour […] The previous exaggerating of von Hartmann about the subconscious as a more gifted double of the conscious personality were standing objects of ridicule, and as for what was to come, Freud and misconstructions of Freud did not yet count at Radcliffe’. Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Leon M. Solomons and Gertrude Stein, ‘Normal Motor Automatism’, *Psychological Review*, 3 (1896), 492-512 (511 cited). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘It was a very lovely spring day, Gertrude Stein had been going to the opera every night and going also to the opera in the afternoon and had been otherwise engrossed and it was the period of the final examinations, and there was the examination in William James’ course. She sat down with the examination paper before her and she just could not. Dear Professor James, she wrote at the top of the paper. I am so sorry but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy today, and left. The next day she had a postal card from William James saying, Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly how you feel I often feel like that myself. And underneath it he gave her work the highest mark in his course’. Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Stein, ‘Cultivated Motor Automatism: A Study of Character in its Relation to Attention’, *Psychological Review*, 5 (1898), 295-306 (295 cited). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Stein, ‘Cultivated Motor Automatism’, 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gertrude Stein, ‘The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*’, in *Look at Me Now*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Gertrude Stein, ‘The Gradual Making’, 87 (citing *The Making of Americans*). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Gertrude Stein, *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings*, intro. Leon Katz, appendix by Donald Gallup (New York: Liveright, 1971), 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ‘Gradual Making’*,* 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ‘Gradual Making’, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ‘Portraits as Repetition’, in *Look at Me Now*, 109-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ‘The Gradual Making’, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Journey into the Self: Being the Letters, Papers and Journals of Leo Stein*, ed. Edmund Fuller (New York: Crown, 1950), 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Cézanne by Himself: Drawings, Paintings, Writings*, ed. Richard Kendall (New York: Little, Brown, 2001), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Cézanne by Himself*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Stein, ‘The Gradual Making’, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B.Toklas*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 457-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. John Hyde Preston, ‘A Conversation with Gertrude Stein’, in *Gertrude Stein Remembered,* 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Portraits and Repetition*, 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Stein, *Wars I have Seen* (London: Batsford, 1945), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Friedrich A. Kittler, ‘Gramophone, Film, Typewriter’, *October,* no. 41 (Summer 1987), 104. See also his *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Walter Benjamin, ‘A Short History on Photography’, in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For an analysis of the techniques developed to support the new spirit, see Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1995), xiii ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Etienne-Jules Marey, *Animal Mechanism: A Treatise on Terrestrial and Aerial Locomotion* (New York: D. Appleton, 1879), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Etienne-Jules Marey, *Movement*, trans. Eric Pritchard, (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Jonathan Crary, *Suspension of Perception. Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press,2000), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 237-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Braun, *Picturing Time*, 66. See also Mary Ann Doane,‘Temporality, Storage, Legibility: Freud, Marey, and the Cinema’, *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996), 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *The Making of Americans*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: Penguin, 1974), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London, 1978, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography. A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Quoted in *On Photography,* 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. ‘Portraits and Repetition’*,* 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. ‘Composition as Explanation’*,* 26, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Michael J. Hoffmann, *Gertrude Stein* (London: George Prior, 1976), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Stein, *Everybody’ s Autobiography*, 193, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Allegra Stewart, *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Stewart, *Gertrude Stein and the Present,* viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. ‘To know what the human mind is there is no knowing what the human mind is because as it is it is;…nobody sees the human mind while it is being existing’. Stein, *The Geographical History of America, or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, intro. Thornton Wilder (New York: Random House, 1936), 104, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Giulio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein. A Biography of her Work*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Sutherland *, Gertrude Stein. A Biography of her Work*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *The Autobiography of Alice B.Toklas,* 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Gertrude Stein. A Biography of her Work*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Quoted from Elizabeth Sprigge, *Gertrude Stein: Her Life and Her Work* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Leo Stein, *Journey into the Self*, 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. From a letter to Mabel Weeks, quoted in *The Charmed Circle*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ben Reid, *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1958, 170-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. ‘The first glimpse you get of her, as she trudges resolutely up onto 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 Jo 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 five hundred”, 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…But why are we here? Well, there are two answers to that question. Miss Stein knows one; we know the other. She knows we have come because we are interested-not so much in her as in her writing. We know better. We are here because we are curious – not so much about her writing, which we have never read, and probably never will, as about herself-an apparently sensible, perhaps really sane woman who has spent most of her life writing absolute balderdash, and then, by gum, a year ago published a book that was perfectly sailing and got her on the best-seller list. We want to see what this creature looks like; we want to hear what she has to say for herself’. T. S. Matthews, *Angels Unawares* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1985). Matthews – whose recollections of Laura Riding in *Under the Influence* take a similar if more hostile course – met Stein on her American tour in 1934-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. For a detailed history of Stein’s criticism see Michael Hoffman’s introduction to *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, B.T. Basford, Ltd., London, 1938, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-1914*, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Randa Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language and Cubism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *The Structure of Obscurity*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *The Structure of Obscurity*, xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *The Development of Abstractionism*, 59

    [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 283-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *On Photography*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. See e.g the eloquent response to the poems in William H. Gass, *The World Within the Word* (New York: Knopf, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. ‘Poetry and Grammar’, *Look at Me Now*, 141-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Poetry and Grammar*, 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *Tender Buttons*, in *Look at Me Now*, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. *Tender Buttons*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. *Tender Buttons*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. *Tender Buttons*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Tender Buttons*, 174, [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Stein, *Lectures in America*, Random House, New York, 1935, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. With the exception of the word ‘pain’ in poem n. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language. Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. *Tender Buttons,* 190, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. In *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Alperson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). . [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. *Tender Buttons*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Gertrude Stein, ‘Portraits and Repetition’*,* in *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz, into. Elizabeth Sprigge (London: Penguin, 1971), 110-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. ‘By a continuously moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing…’, ‘Portraits and Repetition’*,* 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Stein persuaded Hemingway not to continue as a journalist because in that case there were three different times needing co-ordinating: the one in which the fact took place, the one in which the article about the fact was written, and finally the one in which the public read the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 108, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Stein, *Picasso* (Boston: Beacon,1959), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937)*,* 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. *Everybody’s Autobiography*, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. *Everybody’s Autobiography,* 281 [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 108, 109, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. ‘Portraits and Repetition’,108. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Stein once feared that she might not be able to recognize her brother Leo anymore after they had been apart for a long time. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. This is of course an important term in modernism generally: in Murray’s *Rhythm* magazine, and related vitalist celebrations of the term. See e.g. Michael Golston’s *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Cited in Malcolm Rogers, *Camera Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1989), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Allegra Stewart, ‘The Quality of Gertrude Stein’s Creativity’, in *American Literature*, 28: 4 (1957), 501. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 99, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 101, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 106-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 123-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. One could note that ‘quick’ by origin and in poetic uses means ‘living’, ‘alive’. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. In James’ words, one’s identity should be conceived by thinking ‘ourselves as thinkers. This attention to thought as such, and the identification of ourselves with it rather than with any of the other objects which it reveals is a momentous and in some respects a rather mysterious operation’. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), II 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Wendy Steiner, ‘The Steinian Portrait,’ *Yale University Library Gazette* 50, no. 1 (July 1975), 30-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Gertrude Stein, *Portraits and Prayer* (New York: Random House, 1934), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 112-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 118-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Wendy Steiner*, Exact Resemblance to Exact resemblance*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Gertrude Stein, ‘He and They, Hemingway’*, A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Steiner*, Exact Resemblance*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. *‘*Portraits and Repetition*’* , 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. ‘Portraits and Repetition’ , 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. J.A. McNeill Whistler, letter to *The World*, May 22, 1878. See Also ‘“Color Music”: Synaesthesia and Nineteenth-Century Sources for Abstract Art’, Judith Zilczer, *Artibus et Hisoriae,* 8:16 (1987): 101-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. *‘*Portraits and Repetition*’*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. ‘Portraits and Repetition’, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. *‘*Portraits and Repetition’, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. It is interesting noting how in the same period a pioneer of the mind’s darker side, Alfred Hitchcock, was taking a comparable trajectory with the somatic. In *Young and Innocent* and in *Blackmail* for example, the culprits are betrayed by their own bodies: the first is given away by an incontrollable twitch of his eyes, the second by the peculiar way in which he moves his hands. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Original Structure of the Work of Art’*,* in *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. ‘Portraits and Repetition’,120. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. James Mellow, *The Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 122. Already quoted [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Dana Cairns Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happened* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Watson, *Gertrude Stein*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. On Stein and Pragmatism see e.g. Clive Bush*, Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James and Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Lisi Schoenbach, ‘“Peaceful and Exciting”: Habit, Shock, and Gertrude Stein’s Pragmatic Modernism’, *Modernism-Modernity* 11:2 (2004): 239-259. A rather different view, predicated on Stein’s rejection of Pragmatism, is Lisa Ruddick’s in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. # There are of course other studies touching on the plays, for example Steve Watson’s *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thompson and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (London: University of California Press, 2000); the most useful recent example is Sara J. Ford’s *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002), esp. ch.2. See also Mary Irwin Bainum, ‘Gertrude Stein’s Theatre’, Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Betsy Alayne Ryan, *Gertrude Stein’s Theater of the Absolute* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1984), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Jane Palatini Bowers, *‘They Watch Me as They Watch This’: Gertrude Stein’s Metadrama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Sarah Bay–Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein’s Avant-Garde Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Gertrude Stein, ‘Plays’, in *Look at Me Now*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. ‘Plays’, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937)*,* 283, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Susan Sontag, *Styles of radical will,* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Stein, *Plays*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography,* 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Lewellys Baker, *The Nervous System and its Constituent Neurones* (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. James had studied psychophysics in Germany, which assumed that ‘every conscious event has a physical basis’; see Luis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 259; and on Stein and psychophysics, Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 225ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. William James, *The Principles of Psychology,* 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), I 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Dana Cairns Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happened* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Stein, *Plays*, 65 -66. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. James, *Principles,* 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Cheng, *Mama Dada*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Stein, *Plays*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Ibidem, 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Ibidem, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Cited in Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989), xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Michael Feingold, ‘Steins of life’ Review of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, dir. Robert Wilson, *Village Voice* 21 July 1992, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Program Notes for *Four Saints in Three Acts.* By Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. Forty-fourth Street Theater. March 1934. Gertrude Stein Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Stein, *Plays*, 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Stein, *Plays*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Stein, *Plays*,73. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Benedetto XVI, *Spe Salvi*¸ 30 November 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Stein, *Plays*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Also see Heidegger’s use of the term (Wesen) to mean the meaning of something; the way it pursues its course through time. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays¸*trans. and ed. William Lovitt(New York: Harper & Row, 1977), *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Stein, *Portraits and Repetition,* 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Ibidem,76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Mabel Dodge Luhan, wrote the first critical analysis of Gertrude’s writings to appear in America, in “Speculations, or Post-Impressionists in Prose”, published in a special exhibition issue of *Arts and Decoration*, 3:5, March 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Stein*, Portraits and Repetition*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content* (Stanford: Meridian, 1999), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Stein, *Plays,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Ibidem*,* 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Ibidem, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Ibidem*,* 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. See Appendix II for excerpts clarifying the concept of landscape play [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Stein, *Plays*,81. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Stein, *Plays*,80 [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Stein, *Plays,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. On Stein’s avoidance of arrest and the role of Bernard Faÿ in protecting her, see Janet Malcolm**,** *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Mellow, *The Charmed Circle. Gertrude Stein and Company* , 534. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Mellow, *The Charmed Circle*, 535. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, edited by H. Wiley Hitchcock and Charles Fussell, M.U.S.A. vol. 18 (Middleton, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson: Composition as Conversation*, ed. Susan Holbrook and Thomas Dilworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Paul Wittke, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Virgil Thomson Foundation, 1996), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts / An Opera to be Sung*, 1929, 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Wittke, *Virgil Thomson,* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Norman Weinstein, ‘Four Saints in Three acts: Play as Landscape’ in *Gertrude Stein: Modern Critical Views*, ed.Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House, 1986), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Thornton Wilder, Introduction to Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America, or, The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York: Random House, 1936), 43-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All*,in *Last Operas and Plays*, ed. Carl Van Vechten(New York: Vintage, 1949), 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Alice B. Toklas, ‘Between Classics’, *The New York Times*, March 4, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Alice B. Toklas, ‘Between Classics’. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Ryan *, Gertrude Stein’s Theatre of the Absolute,* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. http://www.gertstein.org/mission.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. http://www.gertstein.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. http://www.gertstein.org/mission.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Donald B. Vestal, Letters to Gertrude Stein, 30th November 1934, Gertrude Stein Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Donald B. Vestal, Letters to Gertrude Stein, 9 September 1935, Gertrude Stein Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Stein, *The Geographical History of America,* in *Writings, 1932-1946*, edited by Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Letter to Gertrude Stein. 13 Augus 1935. Gertrude Stein Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Charles Bernstein *Stein's Identity*, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 42:3 (1996), 485-488. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Letter to Gertrude Stein. 9 September 1925. Gertrude Stein Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
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264. Rubery, Annette. “[The Mother of Postmodernism? Gertrude Stein On-Line](http://www.ipl.org/redirect?url=http://www.tenderbuttons.com/gsonline/timesense/1_1rubery.html)”

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265. Stein, *Portraits and Repetition*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. *What Happened*, A five-act play, in *Geography and Plays* (Boston: Four Seas, 1922), pp. 205-206 [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Stein, ‘Maryas: A List’, *Operas and Plays* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1987), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. *Operas and Plays*, 331 [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. *Operas and Plays*, p. 352 [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. *Operas and Plays*, p. 365 [↑](#footnote-ref-270)