

PLAYS AND OPERAS

Exercises in Group Analysis: Sounding Out Stein's Plays

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More than a decade ago I ran a graduate seminar that offered an in-depth survey of Gertrude Stein's writing and its uptakes in later-twentieth-century poetry and musical composition. When the students found the experience of reading several of the plays especially frustrating, I suggested that imagining their staging might help us achieve critical perspective. One of the students took up this idea in a seminar paper that unfolded a staging of Stein's play *Identity*, then went on to complete an MA thesis that combined literary interpretation with theatrical performance of several scenes from *A Play Called Not and Now*. Her work sparked my critical sound project *Radio Free Stein* (www.radiofreestein.com) by demonstrating that the process of staging Stein's plays could help readers interpret, understand, and enjoy them.¹

Consider the similarities and differences between the staging of Stein's plays and the usual staging of drama in the undergraduate classroom—scenes from Shakespeare, for instance. In both cases, the opportunity to read difficult poetic writing aloud leads students to notice, for example, Shakespeare's many puns, the extended resonance of a word or sound over the course of a scene or passage, or how dialogue may change its addressee over the course of a few lines. Stein's plays offer these challenges for reading along with additional ones (to put it mildly). A reader who aims to read any Stein play aloud needs to ask fundamental questions: How many voices are there? Are the voices characters, and if not, what are they? What is the play's setting? Does it have an act-and-scene structure or some other structure? Should you read aloud the act and

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scene titles? Is any given sentence of the play a line of dialogue or a stage direction? If dialogue, to whom is it addressed, and if stage direction, how is it interpreted? Asking and answering these and other questions require basic knowledge of theatrical form, and and this knowledge must be made explicit. Like other reflexive modernist works, then, Stein's plays can be useful pedagogical tools for raising student awareness of form.

Answering these fundamental questions involves fruitful guesswork, a process of trial and error that resembles the intonational, rhythmic, and grammatical guesses readers make when they read almost any piece of Stein's writing aloud.² When we begin a Stein sentence, we tend to have one idea of its grammar, then encounter a knot or obstacle that requires us to start the phrase or sentence over in order to discover a different structure or intonation that lets the sentence make sense. Staging (or imagining staging) Stein's plays involves readers in an elaborated version of this iterative practice. Readers attend not only to grammatical but also to dramatic sense, a process that is most effective when undertaken by a small group.

A commitment to this process as critical and pedagogical technique distinguishes it from approaches to Stein's plays as linguistic experiments meant primarily for the page. While there is much to be gained from exploring the rivalry between language and performance in Stein's plays (as both Jane Palatini Bowers and Martin Puchner [*Stage Fright*] have done), sounding out the plays leads critics and teachers to explore the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of Stein's writing and its peculiar forms of intelligibility as speech. In this context the criterion of enjoyment becomes crucial. Recall Stein's reply to a radio interviewer's bemused question about the intelligibility of her speech relative to her writing: "Look here, being intelligible is not what it seems. . . . You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking . . . putting it in other words . . . but I mean by understanding enjoyment. . . . If you enjoy it, you understand it" ("Interview" 89). If Stein's writing, especially her plays, disables the masterly critical habits of explication or paraphrase, "putting it in other words," it encourages us to invent other modes of reading. In order to get anywhere with Stein's work, readers first have to let themselves be immersed in, and to enjoy, the sheer flow of writing. Of course, this experience activates feelings other than and beside enjoyment, especially in the classroom, where students and teachers alike typically feel that they have so much to lose if they give up the fantasy of mastery that accompanies skilled reading. To read Stein at all, it seems, we need to return to the deskilled reading of childhood: reading slowly, confusedly, with a commitment to the inevitability of mistake and therefore of surprise.

Upper-level English majors, schooled in techniques of interpretation, do not find it easy to embrace such deskilled reading. They tend to encounter Stein's writing as either encrypted message or complete nonsense; in either case they feel defeated, frustrated, or offended by the text's recalcitrance to their interpretive strategies. Pedagogically, the challenge is at once emotional and cogni-

tive: How can students be encouraged to tolerate their confusion, to read her plays slowly, multiply, with an open mind, and to enjoy and be surprised by the process of discovering their meanings? I find that creating a workshop environment gives students permission to try out ideas and make mistakes. I arrange students in small groups of four or five and ask them to read a play aloud. I begin with *An Exercise in Analysis* (1917) precisely because it utterly confounds first-time readers. It begins this way:

A PLAY

I have given up analysis.

Act II

Splendid profit.

Act III

I have paid my debt to humanity.

Act III

Hurry.

Act IV

Climb. In climbing do not be contented.

Part II

Run ahead.

Run on ahead. (*Last Operas* 119)

The play goes on like this for many pages and consists entirely of act and part titles followed by one or more sentences. When I point out to students that the act and part titles can be read as names of four characters or voices (Act II, Act III, Act IV, and one whose name begins as A Play and becomes Part *x*, where *x* is a roman numeral from II to LX), the play suddenly becomes readable and amusing. The students read it aloud, and we approach it together as a skewed exercise in analysis of the competitive and collaborative relations among four voices. These voices slowly become characterized over the course of the play: Part *x* is assertive and sets the topic of conversation; Act II often one-ups Part *x* by correcting the assertion; Act III either comments ironically or initiates a new topic; and Act IV concludes these short, circular exchanges with something practical, petulant, or ditzzy.

It turns out that such dynamic, emotionally charged group relations are precisely what Stein imagines her plays generally to be about. Her lecture “Plays” (1934) makes this clear:

I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits.

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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. (119)

I assign this key lecture to students (after they workshop a play) so that they can begin to understand Stein's landscape poetics and what motivated her play writing. The lecture's remarkable phenomenological exploration of the temporal, sensory, and affective dimensions of theatrical experience lets me introduce the important context of modernist psychology. I show how her discussion of "nervousness" ("Plays" 95) and emotional syncopation at the theater—what she describes as the audience's difficulty keeping time with the performance because of the inordinate claim that narrative makes on attention—is indebted to her early training in psychology with William James and Hugo Münsterberg. I introduce James's definition of emotion and his pragmatist orientation toward knowledge, which lets me locate Stein's portrait writing as part of a larger epistemic project of depicting the rhythms of persons and personalities.³ Taking this context into account, the plays can be seen as reflexive attempts to depict not individuals or couples, as the portraits do, but aggregates of individuals in dynamic relations of mutual knowing. They are, I suggest, experiments in group psychology, contributions to the difficult project of trying to understand groups.

Workshopping the plays in the classroom may be thought of as an attempt to recreate the group dynamics that Stein wishes to depict. By carefully attending to their own affective responses while in the process of sounding out a given play, students may observe these dynamics as they emerge. This experimental perspective, in which students are at once scientists and guinea pigs, is often very involving. But while some students become excited by the possibility of discovering meaning in Stein's plays, their recreations raise a number of genuinely difficult questions: Is there some actual, historical group of people that a given Stein play is aiming to depict? Or are the relational dynamics that emerge from sounding out the play independent of the circumstances of its writing? More generally, how important is historical context for understanding the plays? How can we move between the moment of Stein's writing and the moment of our reading? When these difficult questions are posed, in some form or other, I feel that my basic pedagogical goal has been met: Stein's plays have come to be accessible to students insofar as they raise the kinds of questions that accompany the critical reading of any literary work. Practically, students now have interpretive material available for class discussion and techniques to develop a reading of a play in a written assignment.

Workshopping Stein's plays fits well with a pedagogical practice that I use in many of my lecture courses. At the beginning of the last class meeting of every week, after students have begun to process the readings and lectures, I arrange students in small groups of four or five and ask them to answer a set of discussion questions on a handout about that week's readings. After ten or fifteen minutes,

they choose a representative to summarize each group's findings in general class discussion. These smaller and larger group discussions give them the opportunity to help one another work through course material and to compare their understandings with the rest of the class. The discussions also allow me to clarify the week's lectures and provide new contexts for understanding the readings. The handout does double duty: students write short critical responses (two or three per term) to their choice of discussion questions. Moving gradually from small-group discussion to classroom discussion to written assignment gives them time to develop their ideas slowly, carefully, and with greater sophistication.

When I teach Stein's plays, I inform students about *Radio Free Stein* and explain how workshops serve as a form of research in that project. I ask them to listen to several of the audio adaptations of the plays we are reading (in particular, those available through *Softpalate* and *Radio Free Stein*).⁴ Audio, although immediately appealing to students, has its own set of challenges. Students may feel comfortable with a familiar medium accessible on their devices, but they can find it difficult to bring the critical vocabulary of the classroom to that medium. To address this challenge, I emphasize what Charles Bernstein calls "close listening," a poetic attention to the relations among sound, rhythm, and sense (*Close Listening*). Having sounded out Stein's plays in workshop, they have already encountered a version of close listening. I remind them to pay attention to form as well as affective response and to pose (again and again) the question of the relation between form and affect. Depending on the nature of the course and how much time we are spending with audio materials, I will assign or refer to critical, historical, and theoretical texts on listening and radio (Barthes; Benjamin; Adorno) to offer students vocabulary for understanding the peculiar intimacies of audio experience.

For instance, I have asked students to workshop *For the Country Entirely: A Play in Letters* (1916; in *Geography and Plays*) and then compare the *Softpalate* and *Radio Free Stein* adaptations. Stein wrote this play during her wartime year on Mallorca. It explores questions of patriotism and sexuality and especially the participation of women in war. The *Radio Free Stein* version is somber in mood; the *Softpalate* one is farcical—an interesting question is why Stein's plays often invite treatment by way of the genre of farce. The workshop experience and the openness of Stein's writing give students the authority to offer their own judgments and interpretations of the play. Indeed, it should be clear to them by now that *Radio Free Stein*'s sonic stagings are interpretations that can be argued with, that they are invitations to grapple with the complexities of Stein's plays.

I recommend that instructors wishing to use these sound resources in the classroom have students workshop Stein's plays before listening to them. In this way, what is interpretively distinctive about the audio stagings can emerge in the context of the students' grounded arguments for their own interpretive choices. Consider *He Said It: Monologue* (1915; *Geography and Plays*) which begins this way: "Spoken / In English. / Always spoken. / Between them" (267). The sentences that follow are liberally sprinkled with first- and second-person

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pronouns, immediately raising the question of how to reconcile the clearly dialogic nature of the play with its subtitle. At the *Radio Free Stein* workshop on this play, participants developed several different answers to this question before agreeing that *He Said It* could be heard as depicting two women trying to recall, discuss, and (at times) recreate a man's monologue. No doubt other workshops would arrive at another staging idea, one that would result in a very different interpretation (again, a comparison with the *Softpalate* recording is useful).

One goal of the *Radio Free Stein* project is to let students hear Stein's plays as "not a-referential but *multiply referential*" (Porte 83). How can we show students that her writings can be multiply interpreted not because they mean either nothing or anything but because their meanings emerge from her distinctive compositional methods as these intertwine the personal, literary, and historical in a complex weave? Consider *Photograph* (1920; in *Last Operas and Plays*), one of the audio adaptations I am currently working on. The play thematizes twins as bearing some analogical relation to photographic duplication ("Let me hear the story of the twin. So we begin. / Photograph." [152]), but it is not yet clear to me or my collaborators what this play is specifically doing with this idea. The next time I workshop the play in the classroom, I will need to decide how much historical and biographical research to bring to students. There is certainly an opportunity to discuss the history of photography in the United States, from its Civil War embedding in sentimental discourses of preservation and revelation to the changing meanings of photography in modernist revaluations around the First World War. One could also discuss Stein's personal relationships, especially with her brother Leo and with the family members of their parents' generation. These different strands might be woven together around what a possible setting of this play: one or two people looking at an old photograph of a family on the verge of separation. This approach risks bringing too much detail into the classroom, but at the same time it could show students how the process of interpreting Stein's plays involves moving back and forth between conventional historical research methods (which they typically learn in their English courses) and more experimental approaches to reading (which the workshop experience provides).

I invite students to use whatever resources they can to read and think with Stein's plays inventively. Those who are particularly keen I give the option of creating their own audio adaptation, which will be linked to the *Radio Free Stein* Web site; sometimes I invite them to join my collaborators at one of our play workshops. Each of our audio adaptations is accompanied by an interpretive essay that asks, What can we say about the play now, from the perspective of having staged it sonically, that we could not say before? This question highlights the movement between creative-dramatic and critical-interpretive approaches. My specific goal is to find ways to make sense of Stein's plays; my general goal is to introduce students to the necessarily reciprocal relations between forms of experience they tend to place in opposition. Instead of setting the academic against the creative, I suggest that critical and epistemic energies

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may motivate theatrical works, and vice versa, that theatrical energies may motivate works of criticism and knowledge. Stein's plays offer the opportunity for students and teachers alike to consider the fundamental connections between theater and thinking.

NOTES

¹ *Radio Free Stein* plans to render at least ten of Gertrude Stein's plays into recorded dramatic and musical form. For more information and a link to a video recording of Heather Arvidson's MA thesis, see www.radiofreestein.com/info/.

² On the role of intonation in reading Stein, see S. Meyer 296–317; Pound.

³ For more on Stein's relation to James's psychology and late-nineteenth-century science, see S. Meyer 209–40. Two James essays I recommend are "What Is an Emotion" (1884) and "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience" (1905). For a reading of Stein's "Plays" vis-à-vis several theories of emotion and a fuller explication of the idea that Stein's plays are experiments in group psychology, see my *Transferral Poetics* (96–118).

⁴ For the *Softpalate* project, see www.ubu.com/sound/softpalate_stein.html. Other resources on Stein and sound (such as the recording Stein made for Columbia in 1935) can be found on *UbuWeb* and at *PennSound*. See the bibliography on the *Radio Free Stein* Web site for an extensive list of online resources on Stein and sound.