

## **Being and Stein: The Temporal Insistence of Existence in Gertrude Stein's Early Portraits**

Ella Bedard

*In this essay Ella Bedard takes on the most recalcitrant oeuvre of literary portraiture – the portraits of Gertrude Stein:*

*One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.*

*What can one make of this opacity? Does it really represent Picasso? And what would “interpretation” of such a work look like? Ignoring most readers’ instincts to run in the opposite direction from these texts, Bedard deftly works with ideas of mimesis, arguing that Stein’s portraits are not about describing the person, but about invoking the person’s presence. In getting to that essence, readers need to understand that what looks like repetition here is not really repetition; for it has a relationship to time that must be properly understood.*

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Gertrude Stein wrote approximately 132 literary portraits between 1908 and 1946. Throughout the various stages of these portraits, in which Stein experiments with syntax, form and perception, one goal remains clear: to create a poem that does not *describe* her subject, but works to immediately invoke the presence of the portrayed. Inspired by her former professor William James, by the revolutionary art of analytic cubists such as Picasso, and by the technological and scientific innovations of her time, Stein attempts to convey the animated individuated insistence of her subject. This insistence is what she calls Life: it is the essential vitality that sets every individual in motion. According to Stein, there is no such thing as repetition in human existence. The scenes as well as the themes of our lives repeat, but with each breath the embodied being asserts itself anew. To create a portrait of this insistent entity is to portray a being that is always in a state of becoming. To achieve this goal, Stein creates a sense of space and time in her poems in order to enact the temporality and flux of her human subject.

I will be looking at two poems, “Picasso” (1911) and “Orta or One Dancing” (1912), both from the early phase of Stein’s portraiture. Both poems consist of long block paragraphs in which slightly varying repetitive phrases describe a “one” that is constantly in the midst of some activity. Stein’s portraits aim to capture the intensity of movement that pervades the being she seeks to portray both inside and out. She makes use of two different types of repetition – one compositional, the other syntactical – to create two different effects of movement. The repetition of certain words or series of words in Stein’s portraits serves to characterize the unique insistence of an individual. Like the motor of a car, this interior momentum propels a being to

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life. However, the continuous repetition of these phrases, which vary constantly, do much more than describe the abstract nature of the subject; they *embody* it and bring the portrayed subject into temporal space. Stein's repetition of words and phrases serves to mimic the subject of the poem, thereby referring to it as an ever-moving temporal entity. Her poems are not *about* the identity of the portrayed subject. Rather, the reader becomes acquainted with a living thing, which exists in time and fluctuates the same way we do.

As a student at Radcliffe University in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stein studied psychology and philosophy under William James. Her earliest published works were scientific papers describing the results of experiments she had conducted using automatic writing to reveal the "secondary personality" of her test subjects<sup>1</sup>. Critic B.F Skinner was the first to accuse Stein of using this same technique of automatic writing to create her poetry. Joan Retallack explains that in this essay "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?" Skinner accuses Stein of not engaging "the knowledgeable part of her 'fine mind'; instead, he claimed, [she] resorted to an immature self, activated by the process of automatic writing."<sup>2</sup> However, Stein explains in a methodological manner that her portraits are not the result of an unconscious practice, but experiments of a very different kind. When Stein switched from science to art, it was not automatism that she carried with her, but tenets of Jamesian thought concerning the nature of subjectivity and time, as well as a propensity for scientific methodology and experimentation. The word-portraits that appear throughout Stein's career are part of what Wendy Steiner calls a "complex quasi-scientific process of fitting theory and technique to precise observation."<sup>3</sup> Though Stein's writing is often characterized as naive or nonsensical, her process is anything but. She was interested in the relationship between perception and representation, between time and art, and between subject and object. In *Lectures on America* Stein provides the theoretical insight that supports her poetry. Though these explanations are often as opaque as the poetry explained, they can help to elucidate the program that informs so much of her writing, especially her literary portraiture. As we will see, Stein's poetry represents her rigorous attempts to put her theory into praxis.

In her essay "Gertrude Stein's Portraits of Matisse and Picasso," Ulla Haselstein defines traditional literary portraits as

Short and condensed prose texts that do not employ narration and ignore chronological time in their identification of psychological traits held to be essential for the represented subject.<sup>4</sup>

The artist's job is to astutely select the traits that best characterize the portrayed so that the reader gains knowledge *about* the subject. Unlike conventional literary portraits, which render the portrayed subject as an abstract essence, Stein's portraits attempt to mimic and enact the life of the subject. Haselstein argues that in these early portraits, Stein has not entirely thrown out the conventions of the genre since she still "present[s] and evaluate[s] certain habits or traits of the

portrayed individual,”<sup>5</sup> thereby offering the reader a definition of who this person is essentially. However, Stein does not describe the dance that Orta performs, nor does she once mention that Picasso is a painter. The traits that Stein associates with her subjects – Picasso’s “working” and Orta’s “dancing” – are not descriptions of what these people do, but articulation of their individual essences. Essence is what Stein calls the *bottom nature* of a person. It is what constitutes the existence of the individual; it is their meaning for being.

If and when Stein uses descriptive words, it is not for her reader to acquire *knowledge about* the subject, but rather to acquire an *immediate acquaintanceship* with the subject portrayed. The objective of her portraits is to perform a whole and animate individual so that the reader becomes familiar with the person just as Stein herself is familiar with them. In *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, Wendy Steiner argues that in order to achieve such an effect, Stein models her poems off a Jamesian concept of knowledge acquisition. James believes that we either “know about” an object, or we are “acquainted” with it.<sup>6</sup> To be acquainted with an entity is to be familiar with it as “a simple point in a perceiver’s awareness.”<sup>7</sup> We do not conceive of someone with whom we are familiar as a list of characteristics, nor does a single memory of an acquaintance stand as a synecdoche for their entire being. Rather, we are able to evoke the essence of that person without caricaturizing them. In our mind’s eye we can “render with immediacy the independence and uniqueness, the essence” of that person.<sup>8</sup> This is the purpose of Stein’s portraits; she facilitates an acquaintanceship between reader and subject. Her poetry works to present a complex and complete human being just as she perceives them, without reducing or distorting their being.

Descriptive portraiture could not bring the reader into direct acquaintance with the portrayed subject, since description always refers to the categories and definitions that exist outside the context of the poem and are not inherent to the subject portrayed. Stein strives to create a poem that relates immediately to its referent and to its reader. She wants, as much as possible, to strip the words she uses of all exterior connotation and meaning. Because Stein tries to create a relationship of direct correspondence between her words and her subject, critics have often likened her literary portraits to analytic cubist painting. Like Cubist painters, Stein wants to reduce her medium to its bare component parts. For Picasso this means geometry, shape and colour; for Stein it means sound units and grammar. Stein selects and arranges words so that they are completely devoted to her act of expression. Like paint fresh out of the tube, words are new and unused on Stein’s page. She does not want her phrases or her words to relate to other phrases or words, which would further abstract her work from the thing portrayed. She does not want to *use* names, she wants her poem to act *as* a name; to be the symbol or metaphor that represents the subject. Like onomatopoeia for a person, Stein wants her word-portraits to mean and sound like the subject. She explains:

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Words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing [...] at which I was looking, but as often as not had [...] nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing.<sup>9</sup>

The language in her portraiture does not allude to anything other than the subject of the poem. More than that, Stein tries to eliminate the naturally allusive quality of language by using words that carry as little connotation as possible. Her language is simple, colloquial, and extremely limited. In the two pages of blocky paragraph prose that form the poem "Picasso," there are under thirty words used. Her aim is to create a system of signification that is completely contained within the poem; the composition of the poem itself is where her words derive their meaning. In this way, the entirety of the individual is revealed on the page.

The analogy between Stein's portraits and cubist painting works when we consider that both strip their medium to its fundamental parts and resist going outside the space designated by their works in order to render their subject present. But where Stein radically differs from painting is in her need to create movement within this space. As John Robinson explains in *Motion and the Body in Marcel Proust and Gertrude Stein*, a Steinian portrait is "systems of meaning in motion," in which the words used to enact the subject "have no relation to subscribed meaning outside of the meaning and the movement [the poem] is itself creating."<sup>10</sup> The composition of Stein's portrait creates fluidity and momentum, both of which are essential to the human being that she portrays. Of course the words on the page do not themselves move, but the image that they render is fully animate. Perhaps the temporal and spatial dimensions of Stein's portraits make them more comparable to cinema than to cubism, since the poem creates what Stein calls a "space of time"<sup>11</sup> in which the being of the portrayed subject is performed.

Both "Orta or One Dancing" (written in 1912) and "Picasso" (written in 1911) are from the early phase of Stein's portrait program. In "Portraits and Repetition" Stein explains her program during this time:

I put down each moment that I had the existence of that one inside in me until I had completely emptied myself of this that I had had as a portrait of that one. This as I say made what has been called repetition but and you will see, each sentence is just the difference in emphasis that inevitably exists in the successive moment of my containing within me the existence of that other one achieved by talking and listening inside in me and inside in that one.<sup>12</sup>

Here Stein articulates the two principles by which we are to understand these early portraits. The first is the distinction between repetition and emphasis, the latter being the inevitable result of temporal existence. The second is the *talking and listening* inside of her and inside of the one she is portraying, which corresponds to the sense of present time that Stein wants to sustain in her

writing. Both the simultaneity of talking and listening and Stein's rejection of repetition speak to her chief objective in these early poems: to make an animate portrait that retains all the complexities and dynamism that she perceives in the poem's human referent.

To understand these concepts in Stein's poetry requires a discussion of time, which Stein believed to be an integral part of human being and a crucial component of her art. The difference that she distinguishes between repetition and emphasis is the dichotomy between animate and still life. Stein explains that "if anything is alive there is no such thing as repetition."<sup>13</sup> What repeats are the patterns of individual and collective history in which we are always either succeeding or failing, fighting or living peacefully, loving or losing. A biography could successfully summarize the events in a person or people's lives. But this is not the aim of Stein's portraits. Stein writes, "it is true that there is something much more exciting than anything that happens and now and always I am writing the portrait of that."<sup>14</sup> She is interested in the movement that enlivens the events of human history, which serves to differentiate the emphasis of every life and every moment lived. Stein wants to capture human existential striving – the thinking believing and meaning – that animates a being as it perform the scenes of its life.

In order to mimic her subjects, to render who they are essentially, Stein needs to capture the internal movement that she believes to be integral to every human life. She writes,

I said...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 we 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 if this thing.<sup>15</sup>

A person's existence in the world – one's deeds, looks, and relations – is predicated on the self-sustained momentum that is contained within the space of that particular being. It cannot be evoked by a description of what that individual wears or looks like, because its pervasiveness makes it almost undetectable. Stein calls this motion Life. It is one's essence, which both precedes and informs the *what* and *how* of one's being: it is the bare and invisible persistence of our existence that permeates every aspect of our lives.

In "Orta or One Dancing," Stein makes the forward movement of insistence apparent:

This one is one being one believing in meaning. This one is one going on thinking in believing in meaning. This one is going on believing in thinking in having meaning. This one is going on believing, this one is one going on in believing in thinking, this one is one goin gon in believing in having meaning. This one is going on.<sup>16</sup>

What is essential to the movement of this passage is Orta's "going on." Orta has *moved* from one moment of being into the next. She remains Orta, but she is changed ever so slightly by the passing time. This effect helps to give us a sense of Orta's natural momentum. The phrases are not repeating on the spot, they are rolling forward in the space that contains the text. Orta is actively engaged in her existence and in the meaning of her being. With each new phrase there is a slight variation in the activities of her being and meaning and thinking. Elsewhere in this lengthy poem, it is made clear that dancing is the particular form of Orta's insistence. However in this section, Stein displays how movement is inherent to all thinking, meaning beings. Whatever moves in me also moves like a dance.

Following the "complicated simplicity" of Stein's logic, Life is that which we are actively engaged in at each moment of our lives: "if not nobody would live."<sup>17</sup> Existence is not a passive quality in human beings. It is what Stein calls an *insistence*, or in Jamesian terms "the Will to Live."<sup>18</sup> In written or oral discourse, insistence is a form of expression akin to persuasion; one differs the emphasis of their argument in order to insist upon the point they are making. The same quality of variance applies to the insistence of existence, except that one needn't persuade another party of the fact of their being. Rather, the entity insists *to itself* in order to live into the next moment. The insistence of being, which Stein likens to the simultaneous acts of talking and listening to oneself, propels one into the next moment of his or her life. Steiner describes the relationship between talking and listening as a feed-back loop: "One thinks of someone talking into a microphone connected to ear phones which he is himself wearing."<sup>19</sup> We are simultaneously transmitting and receiving our own existence. I listen to myself as I talk and this is how I know what or who I am. I listen to the world as I live in order to know who and what *it* is. I am concurrently being in the space and time of the world and deriving meaning from the life I am living. The meaning of being is not predetermined but generated and interpreted at every moment. I cannot repeat my being as it was a moment ago for I have insisted myself into this next instant of my being, and in this next moment, my being is changed. One's being changes at the rate of moving lips perpetually in the midst of conversation. The ontological nature of humanity is such that we do not exist at all unless we exist in space and time. This existential flux is the nature of human being. Who I "am" is never fixed because my being is sustained by its progression *through* time. I exist in a constant state of becoming. Within the space of a Steinian portrait, multiple panels are set together in order to capture the constant activity of the living being. The poem "Picasso" begins,

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.<sup>20</sup>

The differences between the lines are almost unnoticeable, especially if one watches, as opposed to reads the poem. If one looks unfocusedly at the blocks of words on the page, one sees a pattern of words that more closely resembles wallpaper than it does poetry. But, as Joan Retallack explains, we need to “discipline the eye to work like an ear” in order to recognize that “this device is temporal – holding time in place, speech act by speech act, moment by moment.”<sup>21</sup> If the poem is read out loud, the sequence of phrases is set in motion to creating a living, charming Picasso.

Stein makes the parallel between the endless variations of her phrases and the sequence of film stills that make a moving picture. Stein writes, “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.”<sup>22</sup> Each frame of a film is different from the one that preceded it and the one that follows it. Even if the difference is imperceptible, the next frame dwells in a different space and a different time and thus it cannot be identical to the frame that came before it. Each frame, like each phrase, is completely whole unto itself. When the series is set in motion – either by a projector or by individual reading – each still contributes to the creation of an enlivened animate motion picture. Using this cinematic technique to create a *space of time* Stein is able to illustrate the incessant movement of human being, thereby enacting how the subject (and all humans) exist ontologically in a constant state of becoming.

In writing, the sequence of the film stills corresponds to phrases in a paragraph. Stein writes that “the twentieth century was the century not of phrases as was the nineteenth but of the paragraph.”<sup>23</sup> The paragraph is the “space of time,” which contains the individual wholes that make up the sequence. Each distinct phrase, each moment in which we exist, is a distinct utterance set in a temporal moment. When in sequence, the phrase adds to our greater comprehension of the whole. The understanding achieved at the end of the paragraph is perceived all at once, but compositionally appears as a series of separate moments. In this respect, the paragraph mirrors human existence, which we experience as a whole in its immediacy but which is actually unfurling in time. The paragraph also mirrors the process of acquaintance, which occurs over time but results in an immediate and singular comprehension of who that person is.

It is no coincidence that Stein describes Life in terms that designate expression. For her, living is an act of self-creation, which parallels her creative act of writing. Stein believes herself to be a genius and “the essence of genius” she writes, “of being most intensely alive [. . .] is being one who is at the same time talking and listening.”<sup>24</sup> It is the genius vitality of Stein that makes her listen and talk more closely than others and therefore makes her act of living more intense than others’. Writing is the nature of her insistence. But for Orta, hearing and talking – the persistence of being – takes the form of dancing. Just as for Picasso, it takes the form of working.

Life is at once the generic quality shared by all existent beings and a highly individualized force that takes on a unique character with every living being. The repetition of certain words or series of words in Stein's portraits serve to characterize the inner movement of an individual. In "Picasso", we learn that Picasso is one "who was working and certainly this one was needing to be working so as to be one being working."<sup>25</sup> Though it is never indicated that Picasso is a painter, we learn that there was "always having something that was coming out of this one that was a solid thing, a charming thing, a lovely thing."<sup>26</sup> This "charming thing" which he produces through his work is what also makes him one who "they were always following."<sup>27</sup> The fact that Picasso created meaningful work, or that this work won him a following, is auxiliary to his bottom nature as "one being working."<sup>28</sup> Working is the active principle of being in Picasso. The successfulness or meaningfulness of his work results from the fundamental movement of working that keeps this being in motion. Wendy Steiner agrees that the essence of Picasso is not what he creates, but the fact that he cannot help *but* create. She writes, "'working' is equated with Picasso's very reason for living, with his basic self-creation [. . .] He worked because he had to work and he had to work in order to be one working."<sup>29</sup> Picasso constitutes his own being through the activity of his working. His incessant need to create is the motor that impels him. The work that he creates is a reflection of this insistence.

Similarly in "Orta or One Dancing," Orta is one who is "asking and answering in dancing."<sup>30</sup> The language that Orta speaks is dancing. It is what plays on her feed-back loop; she hears dancing as her being and responds by dancing. For her, "Dancing was Existing."<sup>31</sup> Stein perceives her to be "meaning everything"<sup>32</sup> when she is dancing. The poem ends, "She was one dancing in being one being that one being that one dancing then."<sup>33</sup> It is impossible to say whether it is the dancing that brings Orta into being, or being which precedes her dancing – the two states of being and dancing are what spin one another, perpetuating the constant movement of Orta. The fact that the poem ends with the word "then" indicates that Orta is poised to spin right off the page. She is the one who was dancing *then*, at that moment, but she is also the one who will continue moving in the next moment that appears off outside the text.

What is absolutely crucial to our understanding of "listening and talking" is that it always occurs in the present moment. More than that, it is the activity that constitutes the present moment. Our being unfolds in time, but also composes time as it insists into the next moment of becoming. In "Orta," as in "Picasso," it is the subject itself, the one referred to in the poem that is sustained from moment to moment. Though "one" appears in every sentence, "one" never repeats. Since the essence of the individual is a piece of movement, identity is never fixed. With every insistent breath, one throws oneself into the next moment of existence and the nature of one's being must be articulated anew: "Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series."<sup>34</sup>

It is impossible to conceive of the moment in which one lives in units of time. Though every minute of our being is separate and distinct, we string these moments together in our perception of time as duration. This is what Stein calls the “prolonged presence.”<sup>35</sup> As one moves into the subsequent moment, ‘now-ness’ moves with her, thereby transforming *that* moment into *this moment* in which one is actively living. This makes the present moment both eternal instantaneous. Like being itself the now is ever-present but cannot be held on to: it is the opening in time in which we exist. Time, which one experiences as the ever-enduring now, is the space in which that “one” unfolds. By living, one pushes the frontier of the now forwards so that another permutation of self can be realized in that space. One is, one became, and is becoming still in the present moment.

It is this time expanse that Stein wishes to capture in the space of her poems. Only by creating the prolonged present can she acquaint her readers with the subject of the portrait. Only in the present moment can the immediacy of the subject’s Life be known to the reader. One is acquainted with a human entity – be it oneself or another – in the *now*. We do not understand ourselves or others as an aggregate of moments past. This is because we do not perceive the world with our memory. We know other as they exist immediately before us, as they are incessantly engaged in the act of self-creation. Stein brilliantly lays out her poem as a succession of “now-points” as opposed to present-time, which would read as if each sentence were occurring in the same moment. Though each phrase is of course an articulation of her perception, Stein removes her own experience of time as duration from the poem. Because the poem is structured as series of now-points it is the reader who brings the duration of the present moment into the poem. The reader strings together the various moments of the poem with her own perception. In reading, we partake in Stein’s immediate perception of her subject. Joan Retallack explains that Stein’s great innovation is that she “radically reconceptualize[s] the nature of what the temporal dimension of writing could be, positing the revolutionary idea that one was actually composing the ‘time of composition’ into ‘the time *in* composition.’”<sup>36</sup> The present is prolonged from Stein’s *now* to ours. The moment in which the poet writes is simultaneously the moment in which her subject lives, and the moment in which we are reading the poem. Reader and writer are harmonized in the present space and time of the poem. We perceive the subject in its immediacy through Stein’s eyes but in our own time. Orta is dancing and Picasso is working; the subject is alive and animate in the present moment of our reading.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Steiner. *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein*. (New Haven and London: Yale U P), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Retallack, ed. *Selections: Gertrude Stein*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2008), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ulla Haselstein, “Gertrude Stein’s Portraits of Matisse and Picasso.” *New Literary History*. 34.4 (2003), 724.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 727.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude Stein. "Portraits and Repetition." *Lectures in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 192.

<sup>10</sup> Robson, John. *Motion and the Body in Marcel Proust and Gertrude Stein*. (New York: City University Press, 1999), 182.

<sup>11</sup> Gertrude Stein. "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans." *Lectures in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 160.

<sup>12</sup> Gertrude Stein. "Portraits and Repetition" *Lectures in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 198.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 206

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Stein. "Orta or One Dancing." *Selections: Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Joan Retallack. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Stein, "Portraits," 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Steiner, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Stein, "Picasso," 106.

<sup>21</sup> Retallack, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Stein, "Portraits," 176-7.

<sup>23</sup> Stein, "The Gradual Making," 158.

<sup>24</sup> Stein, "Portraits," 170.

<sup>25</sup> Stein, "Picasso," 106.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>29</sup> Steiner, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Stein, "Orta," 118.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>34</sup> Gertrude Stein. "Compositions as Explanation." *Selections: Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Joan Retallack. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 214.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>36</sup> Retallack, 6.