



PROJECT MUSE®

Makings of Americans: Whitman and Stein's Poetics of Inclusion

Matt Miller

Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, Volume 65, Number 3, Autumn 2009, pp. 39-59 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.0.0041>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/317201>

MATT MILLER

Makings of Americans: Whitman and Stein's Poetics of Inclusion

FROM HER INITIAL RECEPTION AS A WRITER, Gertrude Stein has been consistently understood as an oppositional figure—a “country of her own,” as even her friends regarded her—and the vast majority of readers have continued to reinforce the borders (*When This You See*). Of course Stein herself was the first and most powerful fortifier of her provisional singularity. She stalwartly refused to recognize literary peers, admitting comparison only to figures important to other areas of artistic and intellectual endeavor.¹ Furthermore, in regard to the majority of her most likely literary forebears, such as Henry James, she created elaborate smokescreens often involving some highly suspect claims.² One result of Stein's formidable skills at self-promotion is that although much has been written about Stein's *difference* from other writers, even Stein's most deft and serious readers continue to isolate her in ways that obscure some of her most important literary relationships. Susan M. Schultz, for example, claims that “Stein defies the attempts we make at describing her career historically” (71), and while other of Stein's readers have sought more nuanced descriptions of her relation to literary tradition, even the most thorough tend to work in ways that preserve for Stein an idealized autonomy from her peers and antecedents.³ The move to isolate Stein probably served a useful function at one time. It helped to focus attention away from previous readers' tendencies to see her as a “literary figure,” crucial to others, rather than as an important writer whose own works deserve attention. With Stein's reputation now firmly established, it seems more useful to emphasize how her writings can be enriched and not assimilated by interpretation against the background of literary traditions. One such context is the “men of

Arizona Quarterly Volume 65, Number 3, Autumn 2009
Copyright © 2009 by Arizona Board of Regents
ISSN 0004-1610

1914" version of high Modernism against which so many of her readers have opposed her. Another is the European, especially French context, which has been explored extensively in relation to painting but little in relation to writing. A third, less explored context is that of the American literary tradition that Stein emphatically claimed for herself.

What little work has been done exploring Stein in relation to an American literary tradition has usually emphasized Stein's connections with William and Henry James; however, Stein's connections to an American literary context go well beyond the Jameses.⁴ Stein's claim in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) that "in all of her formative period she did not read [Henry James] and was not interested in him" is almost certainly duplicitous,⁵ but her explanation why, that "one is always naturally antagonistic to one's parents and sympathetic to one's grandparents," does seem to hold some truth. Stein does not elaborate on who these "grandparents" might be in *The Autobiography*, but she provided numerous suggestions during her lecture tour of America in 1934–35. Specifically, Stein describes a lineage that includes Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Whitman, and Twain, leading up to Henry James, and then her.⁶ Of these authors, the one whom she describes the most frequently, thoroughly, and insistently, is Whitman. Although Stein's references to Whitman during her tour of America have been noted in passing, no one has ever assembled Stein's repeated and emphatic claims about Whitman into a coherent picture (Meyer 92; DeKoven, "Breaking" 225–26). Stein mentioned Whitman at least five separate times, and in fact, she explicitly claims—long before most of Whitman's critics did—that Whitman is what Alan Trachtenberg has called our first and most important "precipitant of the modern."

The first two of Stein's references to Whitman come from an essay she wrote in Paris in preparation for her lectures. In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein shows a clear sensitivity toward one aspect of Whitman's linguistic experimentation. This reference begins with Stein's description of how "a very very much older brother" had written a poem about a "little square of grass" that "had been just a square of grass" until transformed into poetry by his being in love. Stein joins her brothers in laughter at the results—"the poem was funny and he knew it was funny" (330)—but then describes a much more famous "grass poem," which enacts a crucial breakthrough into what Stein refers to as the American twentieth century:

Naturally, and one may say that is what made Walt Whitman naturally that made the change in the form of poetry, that we who had known the names for so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them. . . . This that I have just described, the creating it without naming it, was what broke the rigid form of the noun the simple noun poetry which now was broken. (331)

The fact that Stein so rarely elaborates on any but her own literary breakthroughs makes this a particularly provocative description. Later in the essay, she offers an interpretation of the title, *Leaves of Grass*:

And then Walt Whitman came. He wanted really wanted to express the thing and not call it by its name. He worked very hard at that, and he called it *Leaves of Grass* because he wanted it to be as little a well known name to be called upon passionately as possible. I do not at all know whether Whitman knew that he wanted to do this but there is no doubt at all but that is what he did want to do. (333)

Here Stein adds a unique contribution to the long line of Whitman's readers who have grappled with the enigmatic, elusive title of his famous, constantly evolving book. For Stein, Whitman's title is his way of breaking "the rigid form of the noun." She indicates how the unexpected juxtaposition of the nouns "leaves" and "grass" refuses to be assimilated into an easy reference. The construction's ambiguity forces readers to consider other possible references, thus breaking the fixed, "rigid" nineteenth-century relation to nouns, which had been stultifying literature until Whitman and then Stein herself. Stein's reading of Whitman recalls her own efforts to create depictions without naming or directly describing, an endeavor she takes up repeatedly, especially in *Tender Buttons* (1914) and her portraits.

Another reference Stein makes to Whitman, also made in Paris while preparing for her lectures in America, articulates an idea that became crucial to Stein throughout the thirties, especially in her long Whitmanian mediation, *The Geographical History of America* (1936). In this essay, she explores an idea first suggested in a description of a conversation with Bertrand Russell in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (151–52). For Stein (as for Whitman before her) Americans have a way of being, choosing, and consequentially writing that is fundamentally

different from the British. Stein associates the British way of being, the “completely daily island life,” that is totally preoccupied with “daily living,” with outdated nineteenth-century writing (“What is English” 197–201). In America, there is “really not any daily daily living,” so the “daily living writing” is “of course not told” (220). What is told (and lived) is characterized by a particularly American kind of “separation”:

Think about all persistent American writing. There is inside it as separation, a separation from what is chosen to what is that from which it has been chosen.

Think of them, from Washington Irving, Emerson, Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Henry James. They knew that there is a separation a quite separation between what is chosen and from what there is the choosing. (220–21)

As in so many of her important constructions, Stein describes a process with great insistence and authority, even as she leaves the terms of her proposition open-ended—in this case “separation,” “choosing,” and “what is chosen.” In the larger context of this essay, Stein relates the choosing to what she regards as great and representative literary works, which, she stresses, have autonomy from “daily living.” She defines this term (rather abstractly) as the ordinary daily living characteristic of the Victorian British, in which things are arranged so that life conforms to predictable, established patterns. For American lives and consequentially literary works, there is no such stable and continuous backdrop, so works of art exist autonomously from American lives, giving them what Stein calls “a disembodied abstract character” (*Autobiography* 151–52). This “disembodied abstract” quality expresses itself in Whitman as what he refers to as variously “the spiritual,” “kosmos,” “metaphysic,” and so on—overlapping qualities that for Whitman, too, are the ultimate subject and effect of great American literature.⁷

In *The Geographical History of America*, Stein expands upon this notion of American character—relevant to both “personal character” and the “character” of works of art—by relating the quality of abstraction to the vast, empty landscapes that dominate most of America. However long before committing to that extended meditation, she first worked out her ideas in a lecture written in the United States and commissioned by the University of Chicago, which was published in

Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein. In this statement, where she again refers to Walt Whitman as one of her foremost exemplars, Stein synthesizes her reflections from “Poetry and Grammar” and “What is English Literature” by relating her idea about Whitman’s breaking the “rigid form” of the nineteenth-century British noun to the “disembodied abstract character” of Americans and their artistic works. She describes how “the pressure of the non daily life living of the American nation has forced the words to have a different feeling of moving” (*Narration* 9). Words used by Americans that are broken from the English “daily living” begin to acquire an expressive dynamism lacking in the British:

In the American writing the words began to have inside themselves the same words that in the English were completely quiet or very slowly moving, they began to detach themselves from the solidity of anything, they began to excitedly feel themselves as if they were anywhere or anything, think about American writing from Emerson, Hawthorne, Walt Whitman Mark Twain Henry James myself Sherwood Anderson Thornton Wilder and Dashiell Hammett [*sic*] and you will see what I mean. . . . (10)

This sense of “words on the go” is extraordinarily important to Stein. She returned to it immediately in the next essay she wrote, relating it to American advertisements and journalism. It is this sense of the kinetic in words that for Stein distinguishes between great and lesser periods in literature. Specifically in this lecture, the distinction separates the exciting literature of the best American writers from the settled writing of the nineteenth-century British who she, like Whitman, had left behind.

If there were any question as to whether Stein mentions these writers as antecedents, or rather as a tradition within which she regarded herself as a recent, central embodiment, Stein clears it up in another statement made on her lecture tour, where she again asserts Whitman to be central to her lineage:

And I said there was Emerson, and there was Hawthorne and there was Edgar Allen Poe and there was Walt Whitman and there was, well, in a funny way there was Mark Twain and then

there was Henry James and then there was—well, there is—well, I am. (“I Came” 104–05)

As these passages indicate, she continues to refer to more or less the same group of writers, but of these only Whitman gets singled out for special mention—first as we’ve already seen in “Poetry and Grammar” and again in this comment taken from a typed transcript of an informal talk Stein gave at Choate:

And the United States had the first instance of what I call Twentieth Century writing. You see it first in Walt Whitman. He was the beginning of the movement. He didn’t see it very clearly but there was a sense of movement that the European was much influenced by because the Twentieth Century has become the American Century. (“How Writing” 153)

Given this explicit claim that Whitman represents the beginning of the modern movement, it’s remarkable that more critics haven’t explored relations between them. Bernard Fay seems to have made the first comparison, relating the importance of Stein’s trip to America to Whitman’s earlier contributions: “I feel that what is going on now in America, what this trip of yours is doing is tremendously important in the mental life of America. What you bring them, nobody had brought them since Walt Whitman . . . and they know it” (qtd. in Brinnin 342). To date only Thomas C. Couser has produced a full-length essay exploring relations between Whitman and Stein. Harold Bloom makes a passing comparison in his introduction to them in his *Modern Critical Views* volume on Stein, and DeKoven perhaps modifies her earlier position in an essay relating one aspect of Whitman to Stein and (less favorably) to Pound (1–6; “Breaking” 225–26). Although clearly there are tremendous differences between Whitman and Stein, if we scratch the surface, some interesting similarities are revealed. Stein, like Whitman, was intensely patriotic, and both in fact were strong nationalists. Like Whitman, Stein adored the “open road,” even if the roads she explored were French, and she did so in her beloved Model A Ford. Both writers were profoundly affected by their wartime experiences, and during these times both felt compelled to dedicate themselves to caring for American soldiers (and both were honored by these soldiers). Most importantly to me here, both were profound aesthetic innovators, and

although stylistically their work is quite different, conceptually, on the level of ideas, their work bears a remarkable likeness.

To understand their relationship, it's useful to come to grips with the version of Whitman that Stein is likely to have understood. Although such a voracious reader as Stein probably encountered Whitman in her early years, she doesn't mention it. We can be relatively sure, however, that Stein encountered Whitman later in two different contexts: for one, in the circles of her French salon, where he was likely discussed as America's breakthrough poet into modernity, and two, from her teacher William James, who was an ardent reader of Whitman, and who lectured and wrote about him many times throughout his life. In either case, Stein would have encountered a Whitman far different from the rough-hewn, "good gray" version prevalent in the United States at the time. The French understood Whitman's revolutionary qualities long before most of their American counterparts, heralding him as an influence on their developing modern aesthetic as early as the late 1880s, when a favorite poet of Stein's—Jules Laforgue—wrote the first of many translations of Whitman's work.⁸ By the time Stein began her experimental phase, the French had access to Léon Bazalgette's complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* (1909), and among the French avant-garde Whitman was probably the single most discussed American poet, having a reputation exceeding even that of Edgar Allen Poe (Erkkila 253). In the post-war period, this translation was reprinted regularly, and Whitman was repeatedly described as a literary prophet (177). Stein could have discussed the radical French version of Whitman with her friend Guillaume Apollinaire, whose engagement with Whitman is complex. In fact, it was through a prank of Apollinaire's that Whitman's homosexuality first became a cause célèbre, and so the French became widely aware of Whitman's sexuality before Whitman's own countrymen.

Before arriving in Paris however, Stein would have encountered Whitman by way of another of his more serious and complex readers, William James. Both Henry and William wrote and lectured about Whitman, and both were important American forces in shaping of his image among intellectuals. We know that William James was reading Whitman at least by 1868, when he discussed him in a letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (Malachuk 63). James' descriptions of Whitman underwent several iterations over the years—from erotic sensualist, to all-embracing absolutist, and finally to the idiosyncratic "Pragma-

tist" version of Whitman that probably preoccupied him when he was Stein's teacher (64–65). In a chapter in *Pragmatism*, "Pragmatism and Religion," James quotes Whitman's poem "To You" and goes on to offer two different readings of the passages he excerpts. The first rehearses the familiar reading of Whitman as the prophet of universal oneness, and James acknowledges the uses of that reading to a Pragmatist concept of religion. But more interesting here to James—and, it seems likely, to a young Stein—is his second reading, which he introduces in this way: "But Pragmatism sees another way to be respected also, the pluralistic way of interpreting the poem. The you so glorified . . . may mean your better possibilities phenomenally taken . . . whatever you thus most deeply are, picks its way" (608). James elaborates how Whitman's poem is not necessarily about absolute faith in "the static One"; rather it is about choosing moments from life, about finding, as James puts it, "possibilities in the plural, genuine possibilities . . . [with] all the restlessness of that conception" (608). This dynamic, anti-universalist reading of Whitman would surely have appealed to Stein more than the idea of Whitman as a Romantic universalist or rustic "good grey poet." Indeed James' Pragmatist use of Whitman, with its phenomenological emphasis on choosing moments from life, sounds quite Steinian, recalling Stein's emphasis in her lectures in America on how "choosing" and living autonomously in that choice is a characteristically American way of being and writing.

Raphael Allison offers another clue to how James (and, in turn, Stein) may have come to understand Whitman. Describing James' response to "To You," Allison portrays James' understanding of Whitman as a "pragmatic meliorism" in which both the "monistic," universal interpretation of the "you" and the future-looking, pluralist interpretation are held together as mutual and complimentary possibilities:

Whitman emerges from James' reading neither as a monist or a pluralist, but as a Jamesian *meliorist* who fosters essence why simultaneously creating new possibilities—and as one who "abolishes the usual distinctions" between the aesthetic and the social, the eternal and the immediate, the real and the ideal, thus allowing them to "merge." (21)

In this example, James' reading brings together a "core" and "essential" sense of being with a changeable and "pluralist" conception, neither of

which precludes the other. It is easy to see how this “merging” of seeming opposites manifests itself in numerous other ways in Whitman’s poems, whether the dichotomy is spiritual/material, past/present, male/female, master/slave, and so on. For James, Whitman’s remarkable play of resolutions of opposites constitutes a “pragmatic” function for the aesthetic. It offers a way for readers to comprehend their lives diversely and without conflict, liberating readers from rational anxiety. This contention has several implications for the poetics of Stein. For one, James’ emphasis on Whitman’s merging of seeming opposites would likely have found a receptive audience in Stein, who herself was seldom perturbed by logical contradictions. Related to this is how James’ reading stresses that Whitman’s poem generates multiple and simultaneously possible interpretations. It is telling for Stein’s future poetry that these mutual readings are made possible by the English language’s dual meanings for the pronominal “you” as both singular and plural in possibility. Like Whitman before her and John Ashbery after, Stein frequently exploits the destabilizing possibilities of multiple referent pronouns. Finally, in a broad sense, James’ pragmatic secularization of what Whitman usually expresses in religious terms comprises a psychological use of aesthetic work that Stein, especially the early Stein of *The Making of Americans* (1925), would likely have found attractive.

Although James’ reading of Whitman suggests some compelling ways that Stein may have interpreted him, we cannot really know with a strong degree of certainty how Stein read Whitman. We can be clearer, however, about the points of relation between their writing. A recent study by critic and theorist Walter Grünzweig offers an analysis of a function of Whitman’s poetry that is useful in understanding an important way that his project relates to Stein’s. Grünzweig outlines the cultural work performed by Whitman’s famous inventories of American (and to a lesser extent world) culture. For Grünzweig, Whitman’s long, descriptive lists of ordinary people in the middle of their daily activities serve a useful, “normalizing” function for American society. Grünzweig makes a suggestive distinction between “normal” and “normative.” The normative in society is associated with “norms,” that is “truths that are simply given and that nobody is allowed to question.” These are the societal truths that are regarded as a priori and have been exploited historically by various ruling forces in religion and politics. For the groups that depend upon them, norms are, in a sense, “beyond discussion”; that

is, they are the tacitly agreed-upon truths that are all-too-frequently used to censure those members of a culture who are not a part of that normality (26–35).

Grünzweig explains how “For centuries, indeed millennia, human beings were used to normative ways of life that did not require people to question their value systems and behavioral patterns” (29). A relevant example of a normative social order is the monarchical system characterized by divine rights of kings. That the United States belonged to England was, for the British, a normative truth, a “matter of course” that need not be justified. As the United States broke away from the normative European social order, it left behind the norms which tied them to the Old World. According to Grünzweig, “What evolved instead in the new republic was the notion of normality. Normality, unlike normativeness, would not be regulated by norms, but by the will of the majority” (27). The idea of what is normal is not governed by unquestionable truths but rather by consensus, and so, at least in regard to secular concerns, when Americans sought to know what was “normal,” they did not rely upon the dictations of king or state, but rather turned to themselves to ask what a majority view on a given question or topic was or might be. At least potentially, a culture governed by ideas of the normal, as opposed to by norms, is one more flexible and responsive to the qualities of its citizens. Because dependent on consensus, this potential for flexibility is realized to the extent that diversity is recognized and given voice.

In his role as the chief poet of democracy, Whitman plays a crucial role in expanding the significance of this process in American culture. In his many poems cataloguing the lives of American people and beyond, he famously refuses to exclude anyone, describing, “woman equal to man,” “master as well as slave,” involving as broad as possible a strata as possible of American lives. Thus his well known lists and catalogues—so puzzling (or irritating) to many of even his more sympathetic readers—form a system that aims toward a complete consensus of what it means to be American. Although one might turn to any number of places for an example of Whitman’s desire to speak for those at the margins of society, one his most famous gestures of inclusion occurs in the middle of the 1855 version of the poem that would later be titled, “Song of Myself”:

Through me many long dumb voices,
 Voices of interminable generations of slaves,
 Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
 Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and
 dwarfs,
 Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion (*Poetry* 50)

In poem after poem, Whitman gathers all manner of what Stein would later call “queerness inside her.”⁹ At the center of Whitman’s pluralist universe is his idea of the “divine average,” a phrase established in one of the foundational poems of the 1860 and subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*, “Starting from Paumanok.” In Grünzweig’s terms, this “average” constitutes “a statistical quantity in a culture which bypasses traditional hierarchies and which defines as normal that which the average human being, the average American, holds to be true” (28). This average is “divine” in the sense that its democratic imperative supersedes the old elite order of unquestionable norms and for Whitman—especially the early, more idealistic Whitman—provides a fresh system for understanding diversity. Whitman’s census-taking worldview is libratory, explains Grünzweig, because in establishing the normal, it is essentially inclusive (as opposed to the exclusive imperative of the normative, which rules through exclusion of difference). Just as importantly, the concept of normality is *fluid*, since, unlike norms, the “normal” regularly changes, can be influenced by argument, shifting customs, changing generations, and so on, and thus is tracked by polls, which have to be taken often because the assumption is that the normal alters. In this sense, Grünzweig’s inclusive emphasis extends James’ reading in *Pragmatism*, and through his interpretation Whitman emerges as a powerful force for cultural pluralism.

From the very beginning of her artistic ambition, Stein, too, was interested in establishing as broad as possible of a system for comprehending diverse human behavior. In her first major literary project, *The Making of Americans*, she set out, with no less outrageous an ambition than Whitman, to “describe every individual human being that could possibly exist” (“Gradual Making” 275). Stein’s immense epic of description originated with her studies of psychology with William James. In “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans,” she describes how her interest in character types distracted her from a psy-

chological study she was engaged in at the time: "I was supposed to be interested in their reactions but soon I found that I was not but instead that I was enormously interested in the types of their characters that is to say what I even then thought of as the bottom nature of them . . ." (271). The diversity of "types," as Stein puts it, of human character, preoccupied Stein intensely for the next ten years (at least through her portraits period) and intermittently throughout the rest of her life. Indeed, toward the end of her career, while working with American G.I.s during World War II, she returns to the theme with a more mature compassion (if somewhat less comprehensiveness) in *Brewsie and Willie* (1946). Influenced by her practice in college studying psychology, Stein began assembling charts and lists of human character types that she later used to structure her thinking in *The Making of Americans*. Stein's goal—like Whitman's in *Leaves of Grass*—was to be encyclopedic in her characterizations of American dispositions. In the frequent expository interludes in *The Making of Americans* and repeatedly in her American lectures, Stein emphasizes that she sought to include "every kind of human being that ever was or is or would be living": "Sometime there will be a history of every one from their beginning to their ending. Sometime then there will be a history of all of them, of every kind of them, of every one, of every bit of living they ever have in them . . ." ("Gradual Making" 274).

Stein's description is not mere hyperbole. It reflects a deeply thought-out commitment that is made possible for Stein—as for Whitman—by what she regards as her privileged status as an American living in what she quite literally thinks of as a "new world." It is essential to Stein's vision for us to understand that we as Americans (and like Whitman, she is quite specific in asserting that she writes for Americans) establish our identities against a historical blank slate. In Grünzweig's terms, Stein's America has broken away from a "normative European order," and as with Whitman, this condition is liberating, even as it creates the need for a new system of understanding human character. On the very first page of *The Making of Americans*, Stein describes her sense of this newness and the desire it evokes in her:

It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, 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 that I mean to tell, for that is what really is and what I really know. (3)

To tell the story of “the new people made out of the old,” Stein begins by focusing on the lives of the Dehnings and Herslands, two prosperous middle-class families of essentially similar dispositions. After dwelling for a considerable time on the daily lives of the Dehnings, Stein interrupts her narrative to meditate on the relation between diversity and normality in the middle-class mentality. She describes how “to a bourgeois mind that has within it a little of the fervor for diversity, there can be nothing more attractive than a strain of singularity that yet keeps well within the limits of conventional respectability.” The “bourgeois mind” in its repetitious patterns of character making is attracted to that which is different, but its capabilities for comprehending difference are severely limited, for when “singularity goes further . . . there comes to be in it too much real danger” for the middle-class mind to tolerate (21). Here, Stein critiques the limited condition of what is considered “normal” in a typical American consciousness. She is articulating one of the fundamental concerns of *The Making of Americans*: a desire to render the pluralistic American system of character-making in more broad and elastic terms.

She makes her position even more clear in the extraordinary paragraph that forms the segue between her focus on the Dehnings and the Herslands:

Now singularity that is neither crazy, sporty, faddish, or a fashion, or low class with distinction, such a singularity, I say, we have not made enough of yet so that another other one can really know it, it is as yet an unknown product with us. It takes time to make queer people, and to have others who can know it, time and a certainty of place and means. (21)

In this highly suggestive passage, Stein articulates her desire for that most American (and Whitmanian) of virtues, a non-conformist individuality, and like Whitman she knows that the production of her vision of Americans will involve a lengthy process. Later in the chapter, in a

direct exhortation to the reader that again recalls Whitman, she tells us: “and so my reader arm yourself in every kind of a way to be patient and to be eager,” and knowing that her American epic of inclusiveness must by necessity be monumental in scope, she advises us to “wait while I hasten slowly forwards” and, again recalling one of Whitman’s affectionate exhortations, she asks readers to “love, please, this history of this decent family’s progress” (34).

To “make queer people” and further to “have others who can know it” involves not only recognizing the vital singularity of strong personalities at the margins, but also to bring those powerful individuals closer to a new definition of centrality, or, in Grünzweig’s terms, of what is normal. From her later position in American history, even the relatively young Stein of *The Making of Americans* can see more clearly than Whitman the difficulties involved in producing a wide view of normality, so although the conditions she describes as necessary for its creation are similar to Whitman’s, Stein’s outlook is more pessimistic: “Custom, passion, and a feel for mother earth are needed to breed vital singularity in any man, and alas, how poor we are in all these three” (21). Stein was by necessity more familiar with America’s assembly-line creation of personality, its mass-production of humanity in a uniform mold:

I say vital singularity is as yet an unknown product with us, we who in our habits, dress-suit cases, clothes and hats and ways of thinking, walking, making money, talking, having simple lines in decorating, in ways of reforming, all with a metallic clicking like the typewriting which is our only way of thinking, our way of educating, our way of learning, all always the same way of doing . . .” (47).

But in the middle of this lament of American conformity, Stein suddenly stops and affirms her own marginalized individuality: “No brother singulars, it is sad here for us, there is no place in an adolescent world for anything eccentric like us, machine making does not turn out queer things like us, they can never make a world to let us be free each one inside us” (47). No, “they” can never make such a world, but perhaps Stein herself can. Like Whitman in “Song of Myself” and elsewhere, Stein’s strategy here is to call out to her readers directly to identify with her as “brother singulars.” By alternating from radically intimate to

more conventionally distant tones of narration, Stein, like Whitman, works hard to bring readers up to the position of psychic liberation she assumes in her persona as author. Her call to other strong individualities is a coy, dignified variation on Whitman's classic trope of reciprocal identification in which "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (*Poetry* 27).

To broaden the scope of the normal, Stein returns again and again to a search for what is "queer" in the otherwise conventional dispositions of her characters, weighing and balancing the merits of each. Some, such as Alfred Hersland, are found to have a redemptive "strain of singularity" in an otherwise conventional, button-down personality. Others, like the elder David Hersland, possess powerful "queer ways," but "cannot count for us" because "it was an old world that gave him the stamp to be different from the adolescent world around us." Although "queer" and "powerful," David comes from the old, normative social order, and so he cannot serve as a central figure for his children. His old world, normative queerness makes others "ashamed," and even his children, who love him, come to "feel uncomfortable beside him" (48). The majority of the characters in *The Making of Americans* possess little to no strong individuality, but Stein painstakingly, meticulously combs through their personalities for the slightest hint, even if she eventually dismisses them. Indeed Stein's quest for "queerness" in her characters can seem fetishistic at times, as in her description of "Old Mrs. Shilling," who is queer if only for her "big doughy head." No one is certain if Shilling's originality is real, or if it is only her awkward appearance that makes her strange, and so Stein turns her attention away, declaring that "perhaps that was all that was queer in her" (79).

To recover the strains of queer individuality into a new, more pluralistic system of understanding diversity, Stein must define a new concept of centrality to replace the idea of conventional bourgeois respectability. She finds it in her exploration of what she calls her characters' "bottom nature[s]" (272). For Stein, a person's bottom nature is something discovered through close observation of repetitive human activity. She describes her early fascination with the process in "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans":

I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people,
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 was there 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. (272)

Stein establishes this concept in chapter two of *The Making of Americans*, where she breaks radically from her book's already fragmented narrative structure. In complete defiance of even the most liberal understanding of novelistic conventions, Stein abandons altogether attempts at descriptive verisimilitude, leaving behind the Hersland and Dehning families to write her own history of attempts to understand human nature and write her novel. If Whitman had written out the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves* in poetic lines and included it, without framing device, as the second section of his book, the effect (though not the content of the discourse) would have been similar.¹⁰ In the Dalkey Archive Press edition of the book, this expository interlude stretches for over one hundred pages before Stein returns to the characters she established in the first chapter.

Many critics have explored Stein's understanding of human "bottom nature." Jayne L. Walker, for example, has examined how Stein's concept of character types and their bottom natures was influenced not only by James but also by Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*, a text which seems to have led Stein to further systematize her understanding of peoples' characters.¹¹ George B. Moore, in his book-length study of *The Making of Americans*, offers a lengthier description, defining bottom natures as "the essential quality of being distinguishable in each of us." Moore elaborates that bottom natures are "unchangeable . . . idealized conceptualizations" that allow Stein to centralize "the range of differences she sees in emotional responses" (50–51). Or as Stein herself puts it:

This then this bottom nature in them, the way it is made in them makes the bottom history of them, makes their way of being stupid, wise, active, lazy, continuous, disjointed, is always there in them . . . can be stimulated or hurried or slowed but never really changed in them, really not ever to my knowing, really not ever really changed in them. (*Making* 349)

For my purpose here, what is most important about Stein's concept is how it pulls together or "averages" the vast diversity of human character types. All people have their own bottom natures, Stein repeatedly insists, but the kinds of bottom natures are more readily assessed than the diversity of human types. Stein's bottom natures are "abstract" not only in the sense that they are non-material essences but also in the way that an "abstract" condenses and summarizes a longer essay. Although bottom natures differ, they are of a more limited palette than "types" which are usually the result of a blurring together of bottom natures. They are "primary" in the sense that all colors are the result of blending of the three "primary colors." While in some senses different, bottom natures are all in a sense the same, as well, because they are unanimously a part of the same ground of being. In short, everyone having his or her own "bottom nature" that is "the same but different" is what makes everyone in Stein's world "normal."

Stein's and Whitman's systems for understanding diversity do differ in some crucial ways. For Whitman, the authority of his catalogues of human types rests mostly in the vividness and empathy manifest in his capabilities for description. More than Stein, Whitman's descriptions are incantatory; that is, they seek to call forth into the world those things that they name. In different ways, both Whitman and Stein set out to speak for individuals marginalized by restrictive systems of normalization, but when Whitman describes one of his countrymen, he is frequently seeking no less a goal than to induce a rebirth of that individual into his ideal of spiritual democracy. Stein's method, in contrast, is phenomenological. Influenced by William James, hers is more a poetics of perception than incantation. Her system of bottom natures results from meticulous scrutiny and comparison, involving a complex system of charts and diagrams and a language derived from the psychological treatises of her day. In the second chapter of *The Making of Americans* and in her lectures given later in the United States, Stein leads her audience through the laborious process of her work's creation, gestures which in part serve the function of establishing her credentials as a system-builder. Stein knows that she cannot count on her audiences to invest themselves in a system based solely on a poet's Shelleyesque role as "unacknowledged legislator of the world." Thus Stein, reflecting the epistemological crisis of early modernism, replaces the romantic authority of the poet with a new kind of hybrid poetic/scientific authority.

The nation-building qualities of Whitman's poetry have long been clear to his readers, and in recent years, his poetics have come under attack for how they exclude through omission significant minority groups or include by ignoring or simplifying crucial differences. In an age where "Americanization" has so frequently come to mean the expansion of capitalist free trade interests or the imposition of English as a universal language and American culture as universal entertainment, it is hard not to be bothered by the implications of a poem like "Passage to India," for example, which naively celebrates the expansion of American technology and industrialization. So far, Stein has largely escaped such criticism, but her quest for the normalizing essences of human character is not without its risks. There are classist overtones to some of her judgments, such as her denigration of the quality of queer-ness that she aristocratically describes as "low class with distinction" (*Making* 21). Moreover, her gestures of inclusion can seem distressingly cavalier, as in this passage from "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans": "And so *The Making of Americans* has been done. It must be remembered that whether they are Chinamen or Americans there are the same kinds in men and women and one can describe all the kinds of them. This I might have done" (284). Stein, like Whitman, came to see herself as a national spokesperson. In the flush of her popularity as a lecturer in America, for example, she declared: "After all a genius has to be made in a country which is forming itself to be what it is but is not yet" (*Everybody's* 92). In assuming their roles as "the genius of these states"—and authority for a normalizing system—Stein and Whitman turn their natural predilections and idiosyncrasies into political gambits. For both, "the making of Americans" is by necessity a risky enterprise.

With their mutual statuses as double outsiders in their societies—Whitman as a gay man of the working class and Stein as a Jew and a lesbian—it is hard not to think of their gestures to broaden the range of the normal as in part efforts to create systems that would allow them to define themselves as central. When, in her coda at the end of *Brewsie and Willie*, Stein concludes "We are Americans" (778), we hear the hard-won pride in her assertion. It is perhaps impossible to know the true motives behind Whitman's and Stein's systems for comprehending character, but the question is not particularly important in assessing how their work relates to the process. More than any other poets in

their milieus, Stein and Whitman expand the range of how we define centrality in American culture, and if their systems still centralize and risk homogenizing difference in the quest for a “Divine Average” or a “bottom nature,” their ways of understanding diversity are still more humane and agreeable than the dominant paradigms of their respective cultural milieus. There is pathos in their excited greetings of otherness that has proven inspiring not only to other poets, but to an extraordinarily diverse spectrum of audiences. As the diversity of readers of American poetry continues to expand, Stein and Whitman’s poetics of inclusion will continue to insure their centrality.

Yeshiva University

NOTES

1. By this I mean Stein’s famous claim made by way of Alice Toklas in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius . . . The geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead” (5).

2. It has often been observed that despite Stein’s claim that during her “formative period” she had not read Henry James, Stein quoted his novel *The Wings of the Dove*, published in 1902, in her first finished work of fiction, *Q.E.D.*, which Stein began writing in 1903.

3. Even DeKoven, whose work has been vital in redirecting ways we can look at Stein’s work, claims without qualification (here echoing Stein herself in *Picasso*) that in terms of artistic radicalism “[Stein] really was the only one in literature” (“Half” 79).

4. Caramello and Ruddick, among other, have written extensively on Stein and the Jameses.

5. For a more detailed analysis of Stein’s relationship to James, see Meyer (90–92).

6. Stein details her own perceived literary ancestors in “Lecture 1” in *Narration* and in “I Came and Here I Am” (10; 104–05).

7. Whitman calls for a new “spiritual,” “kosmic,” and/or “metaphysical” literature repeatedly throughout his oeuvre. Some of his most important descriptions of what Stein more coolly refers to as “disembodied” and “abstract” can be found in the Preface to the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass* and in “Democratic Vistas.” Perhaps his most vehement call is from this extraordinary, extended footnote: “Standing on this ground—the last, the highest, only permanent ground—and sternly criticising, from it, all works, either of the literary or any art, we have peremptorily to dismiss every pretensive production, however fine its esthetic or intellectual points, which violates or ignores, or even does not celebrate, the central divine idea of All, suf-

fusing universe, or eternal trains of purpose, in the development, be however slow degrees, of the spiritual, moral, and spiritual kosmos" ("Democratic Vistas" 1009).

8. See Erkkilä 69–77. Erkkilä's book-length study comprehensively explores Whitman's influence on French literature.

9. See *The Making of Americans* 79–82. Stein uses this phrase repeatedly throughout the novel.

10. Remarkably, Whitman did do something quite similar to this when he recycled much of the Preface—recasting the prose into lines—to write "By Blue Ontario's Shores."

11. For a detailed explanation, see Walker.

WORKS CITED

- Allsion, Raphael C. "Walt Whitman, William James, and Pragmatist Aesthetics." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 20.1 (2002): 19–29.
- Bloom, Harold. Introduction. *Gertrude Stein*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 1–6.
- Brinnin, John Malcolm. *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World*. Boston: Little Brown, 1959.
- Caramello, Charles. *Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and the Biographical Act*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Couser, Thomas C. "Of Time and Identity: Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein as Autobiographers." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities* 17 (1976): 787–804.
- DeKoven, Marianne. "Breaking the Rigid Form of the Noun." *Critical Essays on American Modernism*. Ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. New York: Macmillan, 1992. 225–34.
- . "Half In and Half Out of Doors: Gertrude Stein and Literary Tradition." A *Gertrude Stein Companion: Content With the Example*. Ed. Bruce Kellner. Westport: Greenwood Press Inc, 1988. 75–83.
- Erkkilä, Betsy. *Walt Whitman Among the French*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Grünzweig, Walter. "O Divine Average!": Whitman's Poetry and the Production of Normality in Nineteenth-Century American Culture." *Whitman East and West*. Ed. Ed Folsom. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. 26–35.
- James, William. *Writings 1902–1910*. New York: Library of America, 1987.
- Malachuk, David S. "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Pragmatism." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 17:1/2 (1999): 60–68.
- Meyer, Stephen J. "Stein and Emerson." *Raritan* 10.2 (1990): 87–119.
- Moore, George B. *Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans: Repetition and the Emergence of Modernism*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.

- Ruddick, Lisa. "William James and the Modernism of Gertrude Stein." *Modernism Reconsidered*. Ed. Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. 47-63.
- Schultz, Susan M. "Gertrude Stein's Self-Advertisement." *Raritan* 12:2 (1992): 71-87.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *Brewsie and Willie*. 1946. Stein 713-78.
- . *Everybody's Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1937.
- . *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*. Stein 365-488.
- . "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans." Stein 270-86.
- . "How Writing is Written." *How Writing is Written: Volume II of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Robert Bartlett Hass. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1974. 151-60.
- . "I Came and Here I Am." *Cosmopolitan*. (1935?). Stephen J. Meyer. "Stein and Emerson." *Raritan* 10.2 (1990): 104-05.
- . *The Making of Americans*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.
- . *Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1935.
- . "Poetry and Grammar." Stein 313-36.
- . *Stein: Writings 1932-1946*. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- . "What is English Literature." Stein 195-223.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. "Walt Whitman: Precipitant of the Modern." *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. Ed. Ezra Greenspan. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 194-207.
- Walker, Jayne. "History as Repetition: *The Making of Americans*." Ed. Harold Bloom. Gertrude Stein. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 177-200.
- When This You See Remember Me*. Dir. Perry Miller Adato. 1970. Videocassette. CRM Films, 1989.
- Whitman, Walt. "Democratic Vistas." *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* 953-1018.
- . *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1996.

