

THE POISON PRINCIPLE:
EXPERIENCING WILLIAM JAMES THROUGH GERTRUDE STEIN'S
REPETITION IN *THREE LIVES*

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ABSTRACT

While previous critics have synthesized William James's stream of consciousness with Gertrude Stein's use of repetition in *Three Lives*, I argue that the reader's response to repetition enables an awareness of a physical experience of James's assertion that no two identical recurrences may be the same due to an ever moving present. In Chapter 1 and 3, I offer a close reading of *Three Lives* to illustrate the Poison Principle—the ways in which the character, as well as the reader, experience James's stream of consciousness. Chapter 2 is devoted to the personal relationship between James and Stein, as well as a critical overview of Stein scholarship.

Repetition as a device, and the reader's reaction to repetition, is central to my project, and in Chapter 4 I explore the displeasure often associated with reading Stein works. Through examples from *Three Lives* and Stein's later work *How to Write*, I differentiate types of repetition. In addition to a discussion of the reader experience, I offer a study in emotional reaction, arguing in favor of James's assertion that our difference of emotion is how we may best recognize the variance in identical recurrences. I close with an emotional re-reading of *Three Lives*, concluding that the variety of ways in which repetition is employed by Stein must be approached from different angles according to the type of repetition.

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INTRODUCTION

“It is not possible to step twice in the same river...It scatters again and comes together, and approaches and recedes.”

-Heraclitus

“Stein lives! Stein raps!” asserts Rob Wallace in his book *Improvisation and the Making of American Modernism*, and so, it seems, she does (125). The oft-noted musicality of Gertrude Stein’s writing, and her ability to give language a rhythmic, almost jazz-like quality, is the central point of Wallace’s work with Stein. In 2004, DJs Spooky and Wally paired Stein’s 1930’s recording of *If I Told Him* with “the looping, loping beats pulled from the dregs of the last 30 years of funky various music” (125). The track begins with a lone robotic voice stating “prepare to re-activate,” a phrase particularly relevant to Stein’s use of repetition and the repetitive beats of electronica—not simply an activation, but a re-activation of thought, of rhythm, of experience. While the background beats are mixed and looped, Stein’s poem is read straight through. To a listener unfamiliar with Stein, it may seem that the DJs have cut up the original recording of Stein’s poem, editing the poem so that she repeats and repeats and repeats phrases, but the recording is left untouched, highlighting what for many is the absurdity of repetition in Stein. While Wallace uses the DJ Spooky recording as an epilogue to Stein and music improvisation, I see it as inaugural to a consideration of the physical experience of Stein’s repetition. I can think of no better way to re-activate Stein than by re-enacting the repetitiveness of Stein with an accompaniment of repetitive, electronic beats.

DJ Spooky’s recording features Stein reading poetry, but I am particularly interested in Stein’s prose. In prose, particularly novels, the reader has certain expectations concerning plot, characters, and style. We do not typically read a novel at the same slow pace with which we

read poetry, and yet much of Stein's later prose requires the reader to take a poetic approach. The prose itself becomes a kind of poem, but one that lasts a novel's worth, requiring of the reader an almost impossible degree of attentiveness and concentration. The experience of the reader plays a large role in my assertions, and the novel's particular relationship to the emotion of the reader, are central to how I'm attempting to understand Stein.

Scholars and critics have focused on the repetition of words and phrases as identifying markers in Stein's writing, but as Ulla E. Dydo suggests, many critics have become impatient with Stein and resort to biographical criteria to explain the more difficult aspects of her work (272). Biography on Stein is rich, not only because of James Mellow's frequently cited work *Charmed Circle*, but from Stein's own words in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Critics have looked to Stein's sexual preferences, friends, and gossip concerning both to explain the more difficult elements of her writing. Gertrude Stein herself always insisted that her personal history explained nothing about her work, and that all the clues to her art were in her writing rather than her life (Dydo 272).

Indeed, part of Gertrude Stein's mystique lies in her biography. She was the epicenter of Paris artists in the 1920s, and yet outside academia her name isn't nearly as well-known as those who desired her approval. The works of figures like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Picasso are widely recognizable, whereas Gertrude Stein works remain unknown. In the preface of her book *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, Wendy Steiner describes the roles typically attributed to Stein by critics: "[Stein] is a cultural curiosity at the center of a brilliant era in the arts, a trifler with literature and the occult, a mere tutor to the great, or alternately the most significant force in modern literature" (ix). But, as Steiner notes, these roles, while containing a "grain of truth," seem to ignore the actual work of Stein. I will survey criticism of Stein,

particularly the criticism that concentrates on repetition. Much of this conversation is centered on the relationship between the theories of William James and repetition in Stein's writing, and James's continuous present will likewise play a significant role in my own attempt to appreciate repetition in Stein.

Idiosyncrasy seems to mark Stein criticism more than it does that of other writers, and I can see why. Stein's later writing is hypnotic, and yet I struggle to classify it as enjoyable. I both love and hate to read Stein, and this relationship is precisely what makes Stein's writing fascinating to me, and, it seems, numerous critics of Stein. Wayne Koestenbaum's essay "Stein is Nice" seems to suggest a similar experience; as he claims, when reading Stein you cannot think of anything but "the sentence unfolding right now," (315) so how, as a reader, am I to analyze? How does a reader begin to comprehend a style of writing that leans so heavily on the present, disallowing critical distance? I find that my answer was, quite simply, to lean just as heavily on the present, to consider the ways in which Stein forces me to acknowledge my own present consciousness, just as she acknowledges her own. The product of this approach became itself a kind of Steinian experiment; one that not simply encourages, but requires repetition. While others have synthesized William James's stream of consciousness with repetition in Stein, I add to this body of criticism a *physical experience*, arguing that to read Gertrude Stein is to *experience an awareness of William James's stream of consciousness*. I approach Stein as an experience that collaborates with an awareness of my own present.

Consciousness, though written about theoretically, is experiential. The reader is always experiencing his or her own consciousness. Stein's repetition makes us aware of consciousness as a sensual experience, forcing the reader to not simply make associations with or better understand James's stream of consciousness, but to physically experience the repetitive nature of

consciousness, the past always infringing on the present. As Stein's characters express a thought repeatedly, the reader must experience a thought repeatedly. Every phrase, when recurring on the page, must recur in the present consciousness of the reader, and in this way Stein's work enables a kind of awareness to this physical experience of a theory. A primary part of my project concerns itself with the reader experience, so I will be doing some degree of reader-response criticism, cataloguing my own reactions to instances of repetition. While Stein's style has often been studied through the lens of James, in this project, I read James's work as benefitting from being studied through the lens of Stein.

We traditionally favor chronology as a means of discussing influence, but I find that my reading of works changes the chronological order of influence. When I read Dante's *Purgatorio*, I am reminded of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* despite *Purgatorio* having been written far before *The Wasteland*. When I read James, I find that Stein influences my reading, in that I look to Stein works as a means of understanding William James. In this way, though James has written *Psychology* before having met Gertrude Stein, Stein is able to influence my readership of James's work.

In conjunction with a conversation about repetition in Stein and its relationship to the theories of William James, I offer a study in the pleasure and displeasure associated with repetition. The vast difference between early Stein prose and her later works marks a clear, conscious decision by Stein to move away from a traditional form of writing and into a more obscure form. Repetition becomes more prominent in her later works, and though my project concerns Steinian repetition in her early work, it a useful point of departure for other studies of repetition in Stein's later oeuvre and in literature at large.

We tend to feel that repetition of a word or phrase renders it meaningless, that repetition itself has a numbing quality. The term “repetitive” is synonymous to words such as boring, monotonous, ceaseless, dull and uninteresting. Readers of Stein may not disagree. If we feel that repetition denotes meaninglessness, then the notion of an analysis to find meaning becomes a particular challenge. In *Language that Rises*, Dydo suggests that when Stein utilizes repetition as a device, she “breaks the bond of word and reference,” leaving “a meaning, which, abstracted from its carrier, tends to vanish. Free of convention and meaning, words can be used in new forms” (16). While Dydo provides an extensive study of Stein, highly respected by scholars, including myself, I contend that repetition, through the reader’s own references, renders a word *meaningful*, rather than stripping the word of meaning.

If we find that repetition, rather than rendering a word meaningless, renders it *meaningful*, reading Stein is falling under the rhythmic spell of understanding, of promoting the present. But we must still contend with the numbing quality of repetition as a device, and this presents a particular problem when synthesizing James’s stream of consciousness and Stein’s repetition.

James claims that our “difference of sensibility,” how we recognize that the same thought has taken on new meaning, is through the “difference of our emotion about the things from one age to another” (156). Emotion, then, becomes an important part of experiencing James’s assertion, through Stein, that no two thoughts may be the same.

In her book *Deeper than Reason*, Jenefer Robinson attempts to explicate how we, as readers, may “fill in the emotional gaps” of a text in an attempt to understand it (120). She claims that readers, in addition to filling in causal gaps, may better appreciate a text through our

emotional reactions to that text—that, for example, we may develop a clearer understanding of *Macbeth* because we feel repulsion for Macbeth's actions. But do we have an emotional reaction to Stein? Many readers express frustration or even disgust at Stein's writing, but this reaction, however, is not a reaction to the content, but to the repetitive style. If James claims that our emotional response is how we may best recognize the difference from one identical thing and another, it follows that my emotional response, as a reader, becomes crucial to identifying how Stein's recurring phrases or sentences are actually different, though they appear identical. In other words, by highlighting my difference of emotion from one recurrence to another I should be able to best recognize the ways in which the identical recurrences are changed.

James's stream of consciousness relies heavily on the passing of time—in that our present is always moving, always picking up the experience of a past, and so the novel, a genre that generally operates by following an account of characters that mimics the temporal reality, becomes the clearest means of grasping consciousness in literature. Gertrude Stein has written many novels, but her first published novel, *Three Lives*, is Stein's inaugural attempt to explore repetition and consciousness. I focus my primary analysis on *Three Lives* because it is a novel that follows a temporal account of characters, and may thereby provide examples of the characters experiencing a difference in what appears to be an identical thought, but I am also focusing on *Three Lives* because it most closely resembles the kind of realist novel Robinson claims requires an emotional reading to recognize the full meaning.

In addition to the importance of *Three Lives* being the type of realist novel Jenefer Robinson discusses, the novel is an early work, and therefore provides an example of Stein's initial exploration into repetition as a device. While *Three Lives* hardly contains the most frequent examples of repetition, it is, in many respects, the most accessible of Stein's novels.

The three tales are still without what we may recognize as a traditional plot, however they follow the lives of three women, and have, at least, something that looks like a denouement. *Three Lives*, published in 1909, is itself a form of repetition, since the novel is a reworking of Stein's first unpublished novel, the *Q.E.D.* Whereas Stein's later works may become more abstract, her early attempts echo a more familiar experience for a reader, thereby making them a clearer example with which to grasp repetition. In Edward W. Said's work *On Late Style*, he discusses artist's late works that tend to go against the grain of the artist's previous endeavors. He describes late styles as "nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*," quoting Adorno's assertion that "In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes" (7, 12). Stein's later works are themselves catastrophic to the reader, in that the style is so abstract, so repetitive, it is difficult to pay attention to them, whereas *Three Lives* is a more intelligible read, and will thus operate as a clearer base from which to decipher repetition as a device.

I acknowledge the potential problems with this kind of analysis—mostly, that it entails an individual account of reading Stein. I cannot access another reader's reaction to the different instances of repetition, but through a critical study of scholarship I will provide reader reactions that express frustration at Stein's works. This, then, is my second challenge. If the reader expresses frustration at the style rather than the content, finding that the repetition of words or phrases renders a kind of numbness, how then am I to read *Three Lives* as the type of novel that requires the reader to fill in the emotional gaps to fully comprehend the content? Emotion complicates my analysis, but I am compelled to contend with emotion due to James's claim that an emotional reaction is how we most clearly recognize the difference between identical thoughts. I will first provide a type of repetition that I'm calling The Poison Principle, and then

move into a discussion of the relationship between James and Stein. In this second section I will overview critics of Stein, many of whom have synthesized James's stream of consciousness and Stein's repetition. In the third section I will continue to demonstrate The Poison Principle in *Three Lives*, and distinguish it from other narrational repetition, which leads to study of repetition as a device in literature to further distinguish other kinds of Steinian repetition from the Poison Principle. I will close with a discussion of emotion and repetition in literature, its role for my project, and with my own kind of repetition, an "emotional" re-reading of *Three Lives*.

CHAPTER 1

Lena and The Poison Principle

“The Gentle Lena” is the third of the three lives in Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*. Lena is a German immigrant in America. Lena is teased by the other girls. The phrase, “The other girls, of course, did tease her, but then that only made a gentle stir within her” (172), appears three times on one page.

An example of the teasing follows the iteration of the sentence “The other girls, of course, did tease her, but then that only made a gentle stir within her.” Lena puts her finger in her mouth to ascertain what a green substance may be, the other girls insist that the green spot was paint and Lena is now poisoned. She continues to worry about it being poison throughout the conversation, and even after the event has passed. The reader is told, “Lena would often look at her finger and wonder if it was really poison that she had just tasted” (173). The addition of the word “often” suggests the frequency with which Lena felt the need to look at the poison, as if many such instances arose that ever after caused her to look to see what she had tasted. “Would often look and wonder” is a past imperfect tense, or what is sometimes called past continuous, suggesting the looking and wondering was a habitual act of Lena’s. At the end of the day, after the girls have left, Lena again wonders whether the green spot on her finger was poison.

The green spot on Lena’s finger is a small, a seemingly incidental part of Lena’s story, but with the repetition of Lena’s worry concerning the poison Stein gives an example of what James describes as a “stream of consciousness,” Lena’s past infringing on her present. Lena’s continuous concern about the paint is illustrated by the “gentle stir within her.” The moment occurs in Lena’s conscious present, with an initial reaction to the paint, and recurs in a changing

present consciousness with the worry in refrain. Although the thought is the same, it is, like James's assertion that no two identical thoughts may be the same, a different thought each time it occurs to Lena. James claims:

What I wish to lay stress on is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. (James 154)

The first time Lena expresses a worry about the poison it is an initial response to another girl insisting the paint is poison. But as thoughts and worries do, it continues to play a part in her present, even after the initial response has passed. The worry that the paint is poison is, in a sense, poisoning Lena.

The worry is itself a kind of poison¹, slowly working in the mind of Lena. Already I have written poison² enough times that the word itself is becoming hazy to me. I begin to suspect I am spelling it wrong, and I begin to think that the word itself doesn't sound quite right. Stein chooses to have Lena worry about a poison, appropriately, since poison, like a worry, accumulates in harm. The poison incident illustrates a principle seen often in Stein, and as I continue to explore repetition, I'll refer to Lena's worry as the "Poison Principle," how Stein illustrates the changes in identical thoughts through the thoughts or physical action of the character. When the character experiences repetition of thought, a physical action often

¹ Poison, n.: Material that causes illness or death when introduced into or absorbed by a living organism, esp. when able to kill by rapid action and when taken in small quantity; a substance of this kind. Also (esp. in early use): a drink containing such a substance. (OED)

² Poison, v.: To administer poison to; to introduce poison into the system of (a person or animal); to kill or injure with poison, poisonous gases, etc. Also (hyperbolically): to harm, make ill. (OED)

corresponds with the thought that is itself repetitive, but the increased action may represent the way in which the character, though seeming to experience an identical thought, has been slowly poisoned, carrying now the weight of all previous thoughts; thus the action itself increases in intensity. The idea doesn't fade, rather it keeps coming back and accumulates in power, threatening to destroy the text's readability. Stein forces the reader to experience and re-experience just as the character experiences and re-experiences identical actions or thoughts, and in this way Stein poisons the reader with repetition, allowing each identical phrase to gain momentum upon recurrence, to seep into the consciousness of the reader.

William James claims that "the memory of an insult may make us angrier than the insult did when we received it. We are frequently more ashamed of our blunders afterwards than we were at the moment of making them" (55). So it goes in the case of Lena that she, upon each recurring thought of the poison, becomes more ashamed, increasing her physical reaction. As Lena continues to be poisoned by the worry of poison, the reader may experience, through Lena, the changes associated with the identical thought.

The second time Lena expresses worry about the poison she "looked hard at her finger where the paint was, and she wondered if she had really sucked it" (173). She sees the finger is still wet on the edges, rubs her finger on her dress, and then wonders again if it was poison she put in her mouth. During this repetition of thought the physical manifestation of Lena's worry is enacted through the rubbing of her finger on the dress. The worry exposes itself through this action as not simply an initial response, but a genuine concern of Lena's. Although the worry is expressed in the exact same language, it has become something different, something more serious in the mind of Lena. The action becomes the physical manifestation of an increased worry, an increased poisoning.

William James claims that no two identical states may be the same due to an ever moving present:

What I wish to lay stress on is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. (James 154)

Lena is now seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; and now recollecting the initial worry that the green paint is poison. Though the thought appears to be the same, it cannot, as James claims, *be* the same, because it must contend with the “now” that is ever moving. In fact, even in my re-writing of the same James passage, as he often did in *Principles of Psychology*, *Psychology: A Briefer Course*, and *Talks to Teachers*, it is never the same passage. Each time the passage appears, it, like Lena’s worry, must contend with new examples, new knowledge, making the passage itself changed by the temporal inevitability of the present.

Lena is later sitting with the three girls, watching the children they are responsible, “and she would often look at her finger and wonder if it was really poison that she had just tasted and then she would rub her finger on her dress a little harder” (173). The action has become a kind of reflex to the worry, and as the worry increases so does the action. The idea is expressed in the same language, but it is now intrinsically linked with the action of rubbing her finger on her dress. The addition of the word “harder” in the action implies an incrementally more vigorous reaction to the worry. An incident that occurred hours before is, in a sense, occurring again and again each time Lena rubs her finger on the dress. The finger is no longer wet, but she continues

to repeat the action as though she had just taken her finger out of her mouth. Through her action, Lena experiences in her conscious present the past event, but with each experience of the seemingly same event, she carries each event before it.

As James claims:

When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relationships from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. (James 156)

The rubbing of her finger on the dress has become “harder” because her reaction to the worry is stronger. It has now not only the weight of each worry before it, but also the continued conversation and teasing of the girls. She has another second, minute, or hour behind her, and with each passing present moment she must experience the worry anew, making the worry itself changed by the temporal inevitability of the present.

Lena’s initial worry is incited by Mary, who begins the teasing, but soon Mary calls to Nellie to affirm that the green paint was poison. Two become three, and as the different angles change so must Lena’s worry. The three girls sit together in the warm sunshine, but yet “Lena would often look at her finger and wonder if it was really poison that she had just tasted and then she would rub her finger on her dress a little harder.” They are now sitting, as opposed to standing; the worry must now contend with the dim context of the previous worries, the sunshine, both girls persistent teasing, and, of course, her own increased worry.

Lena's final worry for the poison recurs after she has taken her charge back to her mother, but the language suggests the imprint of the incident in Lena's thought. The reader is told, "Lena never knew for certain whether it was really poison, that green stuff she had tasted" (173). That Lena "never knew" suggests she continued to experience this past experience in her present. Stein could have written that Lena "did not know" whether it was poison, using a past perfect tense to indicate a finality in the worry. If Lena "did not know," the reader would have no reason to assume that the not knowing would continue beyond the moment, but by using "never knew" Stein accesses a past imperfect tense, which suggests a continued presence of the worry.

The poison incident is merely one example of the character's repetition in *Three Lives*. Each tale contains many phrases or words that make an appearance again and again. In some cases, the phrase is used throughout the entire story, insisting itself upon the reader over pages and pages, such as the narrator's phrase in "The Good Anna." The repetition in the poison incident, however, relates most closely to James's theory that no two thoughts may be the same as we experience it from the character's point of view. The reader is quite literally seeing Lena's present thoughts as they occur and recur. She experiences the same thought over and over, but like Heraclitus's stream, because the present is always changing, it can never actually be the same thought. The past event of her finger in her mouth continues to insist itself on the present, but with each insistence—both those given and those implied—the thought becomes something different, constantly affected by temporal inevitability.

CHAPTER 2

William James and Gertrude Stein

The story of Stein's refusal to take an examination in James's philosophy course has been told over and over; so much so that I wonder that the story itself hasn't rooted itself into some kind of Steinian repetition. Critics tell and re-tell this story for varying purposes, and as I read each re-telling of the story I noted the varying meanings it takes on for critics³. The story originates in Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and goes as follows: at the top of an examination in William James' philosophy course Stein wrote, "I am sorry but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy to-day." The next day she received a post card from William James that expressed empathy for her feelings and gave her work the highest mark in his course (Miller 17). For myself, this story illustrates not only a relationship between Stein and James, but the desire to retell a story, despite believing that one's audience has already heard the tale.

Although James and Stein continued a relationship, with him even visiting her once in Paris, they did not maintain what we might call a "close" friendship (Mellow 34). While James may not have been a constant presence in her life, Stein, a few months before her death, claimed:

Everything must come into your scheme, otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity. A great deal of this I owe to a great teacher, William James. He said 'never reject anything. Nothing has been roved. If you reject anything, that is the

³ The following is an account of where I found this tale repeated: Rosalind Miller's *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility* pg. 443, W.G. Rogers's *Gertrude Stein is Gertrude Stein is Gertrude Stein: Her Life and Work* pg. 25, William James Gay Allen, who claimed pg. 305 "The story her final examination is well known, but it is worth repeating because it illustrates so well James's unprofessorial conduct as a professor," *Genuine Reality: A life of William James* Linda Simon pg. 245. It interesting to me that in the criticism, this seemingly identical tale takes on a variety of meanings, must be understood from varying angles. For Miller and Rogers, the story highlights James's respect for Stein, whereas Allen and Simon use the story as an example of James as professor.

beginning of the end as an intellectual.’ He was a man who always said,
‘complicate your life as much as you please, it has got to simplify.’ (Mellow 34)

Though biographer Gay Wilson Allen suggests that Stein’s later work owed “little or nothing to her great teacher” (305), he does note the close association James’s philosophical work and Stein’s creative work shared:

Just as it was William James’s character to apply his psychological observations to finding a method of relieving human suffering, so it was Gertrude Stein’s to apply her observations to the creation of a new type of fiction with a literary style that resembled the stream-of-consciousness of simple people (as in *Three Lives*) or automatic writing in some later books. (Allen 375)

So while James applies his theories to philosophical studies and reports, Stein channels stream of consciousness through her style of writing that used repetition as a device.

While Stein and James employed stream of consciousness in two separate forms, it is interesting to note that William James read a portion of *Three Lives*, sent to him by Stein upon completion (Mellow 146). In a letter James wrote to Stein he claimed:

I have had a bad conscience about *Three Lives*. You know how hard it is for me to read novels. Well I read 30 or 40 pages, and said “this is a fine new kind of realism—Gertrude Stein is great! I will go at it carefully when just the right mood comes.” But apparently the right mood never came. I thought I had put the book in my trunk, to finish over here, I don’t find it on unpacking. I promise you that it shall be read *some time!* (Mellow 147)

And though James died shortly after, that the “right mood never came” is not a problem for reading Stein⁴. Stein’s work leans so heavily on the present, that by even reading only the first section, James, in a sense, was able to gather an idea of *Three Lives* as a whole. Koestenbaum claims that when reading Stein we must focus only on “the sentence unfolding right now” (315), and while James may have never finished *Three Lives*, maybe reading all of Stein is reading any Stein, because each sentence is in the now. Maybe completion isn’t always the point with Stein, because characters and plot fall second to style. James’s stream of consciousness promotes the present, and comprehending this acknowledgment of a continuous present will be vital to my reading of Stein.

William James asserts that one of the principal facts of conscious life is the continuity and coherence of this very life—consciousness appears unbroken as it is immediately experienced. Our temporal register of the present is disturbed by the notion that the past is a constant part of our present consciousness, and the future or anticipation of what may come is an impending variable in our present thought. Consciousness, therefore, as we experience it—as a stream of the present—is actually a culmination of past, present, and future.

Our present stream of consciousness, however, is constantly changing, so while the past may infringe upon the present it is never the same past. James insisted that no two thoughts are exactly the same, so while repetition in thoughts may look like the same idea over and over, it becomes a new thought each time it appears in the present. Stein puts this theory to the test in literature. As ideas recur, although the ideas may be the same, we see them in different relationships, so when Gertrude Stein repeats one idea again and again, it expresses a new meaning with each appearance (Miller 22). The changing nature of the same thought may be in

⁴ The letter was written in May 1910, and James dies August 26 (Mellow 147).

part why Stein, in a lecture, drew a strong distinction between repetition and insistence: “Then also there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition” (*Lectures in America* 166).

It is important to note that Stein at least saw a difference between the words “repetition” and “insistence.” I interpret Stein’s view of insistence as purposeful, that she insists upon something, resolutely dwelling on a word, rather than simply repeating. “Expressing anything,” Stein claims, “there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (167). Stein seems to suggest that being alive is participating in an ever moving present, thus repetition is not possible, because each instance of a repeated word would carry new emphasis. Many critics, however, continue to discuss Stein’s “insistence” as repetition, and I do not think this is merely favoring one term over another. Repetition carries a connotation of numbness, but insistence is demanding, almost urgent in its plea. I will continue to use the word “repetition,” in part because I follow in the criticism that has favored this term, but also because I wonder if use of this term is required when discussing how and why Stein is so unpleasant and difficult for many readers. That we continue to term Stein’s style as “repetitive,” rather than “insistent” suggests to me a continued misunderstanding of how to read Stein, highlighting the confusion, displeasure, and sometimes repulsion at her work.

Many critics have drawn parallels between Stein’s use of repetition and William James’s stream of consciousness. I will later outline the ways in which these critics have found evidence of James’s continuous present in Stein works, particularly in her first self-published novel *Three*

Lives. Her later efforts have been classified by many as unreadable, therefore it is in *Three Lives* that I will look to discover how repetition as a device operates for Stein, later applying these principles to the “unreadable” text *How to Write*.

I will begin, however, with Wayne Koestenbaum and Karin Cope, both of whose idiosyncratic approaches to Stein resemble my own, in an effort to show the ways in which these critics have approached the difficulty of Stein works. Though they do not address *Three Lives*, their work with Stein provides a critical base that is similar to my own approach. There must be few, I would suggest possibly no other writer, whose criticism encourages, and for many requires, that the criticism itself reflect the style of the writer, and here is another mystery of Stein. Part of my methodology involves adopting a bit of Steinian style, a technique I found necessary to a discussion of Stein.

Confusion appears to be a shared inspiration for beginning a project on Stein. It seems that I am merely one of many to attempt a project on Stein for the purpose of desperately trying to make sense of her work. Stein’s writing has been described as unintelligible and incomprehensible, but this incomprehensibility or unintelligibility is precisely what fuels the criticism. Wayne Koestenbaum, in his chapter titled “Stein is Nice,” insists upon the present-ness of Stein’s writing; that in reading Stein a reader will “learn to be tolerant of your own Steinian voracity—a hunger for sentences, a dissatisfaction with every extant sentence except those that you invented, an intolerance for any sentence that you are not in the midst of writing” (310).

It is possibly for this reason that Koestenbaum acknowledges that much of Stein’s writing “takes enormous patience” (309) or remains “unreadable” (310). Koestenbaum claims that our only business when reading Stein is the sentence that we are currently reading: “Not the sentence

you've just finished, or the sentence you're about to begin. Just the sentence unfolding right now" (315). The present then becomes our concern when reading Stein, and though Koestenbaum does not work directly with *Three Lives*, his assertions regarding Stein's writing inspire many of my own. "Reading Stein," Koestenbaum claims, "is always reading in a void, reading the void, reading to avoid—to avoid plot, significance, work, pain, and the past" (311). In discussing Stein sentences Koestenbaum enacts a Steinian quality, allowing the word "void" to saturate in the consciousness of the reader through repetition. Other Stein critics also find this to be a successful way to interpret what has been seen as impenetrable.

Karin Cope, in her book *Passionate Collaborations: Learning to Live with Gertrude Stein*, describes the overwhelming nature of her initial work with Stein.

[...] I never got much closer to understanding or even being able to *read through* the vast majority of her work than I had been at the outset of my graduate work. Something was awry; worse, I began to understand when I tried to teach Stein that perhaps I'd utterly missed the boat. (Cope 7)

Cope goes on to note that the history of Stein criticism has traditionally been either enthusiastically "for" or "against" her work, but Cope concludes, rather like myself, that she is both a Stein lover and hater; that she is equally passionate "for" and "against" Stein.

Cope opens her work with a Steinian poem, which seems to suggest that to get to Stein one must somehow channel Stein through writing. Cope writes:

How, today, is one to look at Gertrude Stein?

Is it certain that by looking, one may see her?

And what is it that one's looking does to Gertrude Stein?

Who is this Gertrude Stein at whom we are looking?

Why are we looking at her; for what are we looking?

Is it really for her that we are looking?...

What then does looking, this looking, our looking at her offer? (Cope 25)

I found that to talk about repetition in Stein, I not only desired to, but needed to adopt some kind of Steinian repetition myself, just as Koestenbaum and Cope before me have done.

Cope's book goes on to explore the collaborative nature of Stein's work with Picasso and Alice B. Toklas, as not simply the collaboration between artists, but between the writer and reader. Cope explores her own personal reactions to Stein, sharing personal anecdotes and challenging her assertions. My own project echoes Cope's interests, but while her work does not explicitly explore the consequences of repetition for the reader, I offer a primary collaboration between Stein and the reader. Any text requires a certain amount of collaboration between reader and author, but in the case of Stein, who traditionally repels the reader, the collaboration takes on greater significance. The introduction to Cope's book, besides providing an example of how confusion inspires the desire to begin working with Stein, includes a detailed description of her experience when first reading *Three Lives*. My concerns are primarily about the experience of the reader, and Cope's reaction to Stein's work—one of disgust—will continue to be relevant to my own project.

In her work *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness*, Sara J. Ford synthesizes Stein and James's stream of consciousness theory and

its relationship to the importance of the “self” in modernist literature. Ford writes, “James insisted that we look for meaning not in either the self or the object but in the experience of the self with the object. In studying only what is knowable through experience, he changed the way we envision the self” (5). In approaching Stein through the lens of James, my own attempts are pragmatic in nature. That is, rather than finding meaning in Stein’s work by way of biographical contextualization or an objective close reading of the object text alone, I analyze my own experience with the work, the experiential effect of reading her words. Ford focuses her Stein analysis on *Tender Buttons*, but her assertions regarding how we must approach Stein through James’s pragmatism echo my own:

In order to see this element of the work, we must let go of the expectations we traditionally bring to a written text, expectations for narrative based on referential use of words and phrases. Instead, we must bring to the text the expectations we might bring to the production of Stein’s plays in which we pay attention to the confrontation between the writer and the script, the act of composition itself.

(Ford 43-44)

The act of composition is of particular interest to me, and in an effort to explore Stein’s act of composing I offer a close reading of *How to Write*. In *Pragmatism* James claims:

ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, [...] Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part,

linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, savor labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*. (James 512)

James's work in pragmatism is germane to a discussion of Stein, and my approach is itself pragmatic in nature; I attempt to "ride" ideas in an effort to get from one part of my reading experience with Stein to another.

The previous critics have demonstrated the unique way in which channeling Stein's style may become a successful way to discuss her works, while the following critics have explored Stein in a more traditional form. Donald Sutherland and Harvey Eagleson provide readings that see James's stream of consciousness as an influence of Stein, whereas Kelley Wagers and Lisa Shoenbach explore repetition in Stein through the concept of "history" and Jamesian habit.

Donald Sutherland's 1951 book, *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work* explores the role of James's "stream of consciousness" in Stein's writing. As Sutherland claims, "the idea of present thinking is the final reality was to be the axis or pole of Gertrude Stein's universe, and her work from the beginning was oriented and reoriented upon that idea" (7). Many critics find Sutherland a fruitful source from which to begin a conversation on Stein and James, myself included. I, however, additionally take to heart his advice concerning how to *read* Stein:

Gertrude Stein uses repetition and dislocation to make the word bear all the meaning it has, but actually one has to give her work word by word the deliberate attention one gives to something written in italics. It has been said that her work means more when one reads it in proof or very slowly, and that is certainly true, the work has to be read word by word, as a succession of single meanings

accumulating into a larger meaning, as for example the words in a stanza of a song being sung. (Sutherland 48)

My own reading of Stein is, as Sutherland suggests, a word by word deliberate reading in an attempt to recognize the single meanings of repetition, and how these single meanings accumulate, rather like the harmful effects of poison, for the reader.

Similarly, in his article “Gertrude Stein: Method and Madness,” Harvey Eagleson associates Stein’s work to James’s stream of consciousness, seeing the past and future as only truly existing in the present, but he also addresses the issues of what Stein called the “bottom nature” of being. Eagleson claims:

The problem is still further complicated by the necessity of "using everything". While the past and the future may be said to be non-existent as separate entities, elements of both do exist in the present. From the point of view of behavioristic psychology the full explanation of any individual's environment involves, if carried to its logical conclusion, not only an analysis of all mankind but of the cosmos as well, that is, "everything" (Eagleson 168).

Stein’s “bottom nature” theory dealt with the inner depths of a character, and through repetition she hoped to overcome the question of using “everything” to convey the present consciousness. Eagleson goes on to say that in meeting an individual for the first time, the observer is only privy to the constantly repeated surface characteristics, rather than the “whole” or “everything” previously discussed. “The individual must remain for the observer a fragmentary or erroneously conceived personality, not a ‘whole one,’” Eagleson claims, thus the issue of entirety of past and present in the consciousness of characters is dismissed as an impossibility in

composition (169). Repetition then, for Eagleson, becomes the insistence of the true bottom nature of a character, rather than a full analysis concerning the character's environment. But I argue that repetition operates by filling in gaps of understanding. The reader is able to infer traits of the character that he or she would be otherwise not privy to.

Kelley Wagers, in her article "Gertrude Stein's 'Historical' Living," sees James's philosophy as more of a starting point for Stein. She distinguishes James's stream of consciousness from what she calls Stein's "continuous present." Of the two theories Wagers writes:

In the summer of 1926 Gertrude Stein famously described the writing she did in 'Melanctha' as the creation of a 'prolonged' or 'continuous' present that allowed her, unlike her characters, to calibrate a story's different temporal moments. Rather than the Jamesian 'stream of thought' that the term seems to suggest, Stein's 'continuous present' defines a new relationship between past happening and present telling." (Wagers 145)

For Wagers then, the difference between James's stream of consciousness and Stein's continuous present seems to rely on the historicity of the characters. Stein explores the concept of "history" further in her later works, but for the purposes of *Three Lives*, streams of thought as consciousness and the continuous present as consciousness appear, if not exact, similar to James's assertion that an identical thought may never be the same⁵. Wagers notes that Stein is able to calibrate temporal moments of which her characters have no access, but since the reader is also able to recognize these moments, I argue that repetition enables an experience for not only the character, but the reader as well.

⁵ Stein's *Making of Americans* is itself a history of everything and everyone; a kind of history of all Americans.

Lisa Shoenbach associates Stein's concern with 'history' with William James's assertion that habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed (Shoenbach 241). Shoenbach synthesizes James's thoughts on habit to his own stream of consciousness:

While [habit] links conceptually the mindless motions of the body to the social mores that determine human values, beliefs, and actions, it also signals an organic conception of history, temporally connecting past behaviors to future impulses.
(Shoenbach 241)

Shoenbach sees Stein's repetition as an attempt to develop the character experiencing habit by difficulty through repetitions. The readers "face habit made visible through sheer exaggeration," or in other words, through repetition (245). A discussion of James's chapter on habit and Stein's repetition is highly relevant, but for the purposes of this project I will concentrate only on consciousness. Though the actions and reaction of the character develop the nature of that character through habit, my project focuses simultaneously on the consciousness of the reader, and thus the ever moving present of the character plays a more essential role. My concerns are to find meaning in Stein, but the meaning is found through my experience as well as the content of the work.

In her work *Language & Time & Gertrude Stein*, Carolyn Faunce Copeland claims that repetition, as a device, is not always used for the same purpose (35). Copeland differentiates between the repetition used by the narrator and the repetition used by the characters. Copeland writes of Stein, "She believed that people reveal themselves through their slow, cumulative repetitions; therefore [repetition] was a valid way to reveal them in fiction" (36). Part of my project concerns itself with this differentiation, and yet simultaneously seeing these different

forms of repetition as poisoning of the reader. Both instances of repetition create an opportunity for the reader to re-experience, but Copeland's assertion that repetition is not always used for the same purpose will prove useful to my own conclusions regarding the varying types of repetition in Stein.

I've claimed that *Three Lives* is itself a form of repetition, in that it is a reworked version of Stein's first novel. *Q.E.D.* explores a love triangle between three women. The plot is similar to "Melanctha," the second of the three tales. Critics have traditionally seen the tale through a biographical lens, claiming the love triangle echoes Stein's personal relationship with May Bookstaver and Maybel Haynes during medical school (Giesenkirchen 112). In her article "Adding up William and Henry: The Psychodynamic Geometry of Q.E.D.," Michaela Giesenkirchen suggests that comparing *Q.E.D.* to *Three Lives* reveals Stein's purpose regarding the novel, claiming "*Q.E.D.* reveals that from the beginning Stein tended toward a philosophically and scientifically motivated abstractionism" (113), but as Giesenkirchen notes, the *Q.E.D.* is far more traditional than *Three Lives*.

I am almost ashamed to confess how much I enjoy reading *Q.E.D.* Repetition is scarce, and the style is far more traditional. While I'll attempt to see *Three Lives* as the kind of novel which requires an emotional reaction to understand, the *Q.E.D.* acts as the first draft for a "novel of this sort." Robinson uses Henry James's work as a primary example for the kind of novel that requires an emotional reading, and part of Giesenkirchen's argument is that the *Q.E.D.* is influenced not only by William James, but also by his brother's later novels.

Giesenkirchen asserts that the "ominous and yet vague, telling, and yet not-yet-telling moment of insight" between "the three lovers in the *Q.E.D.*—and therefore between the lovers in

‘Melanctha,’—“imitates a familiar device in Henry James’s late novels” (113). Giesenkirchen draws many specific similarities between Henry James’s work and Stein’s *Q.E.D.*:

The psychological immediacy of [Henry] James’s late style, his absorption of social circumstances into the minds of the characters and their relations, his juxtaposition of Old and New World mentalities, as well as his treatment of (illicit) sexuality and upper-class economy and morality, all became models for the *Q.E.D.* (Giesenkirchen 114)

Giesenkirchen’s study proves useful to my own reading of *Three Lives* as the kind of work that requires an emotional reaction to be fully understood. For one, Henry James is one such author that Jenefer Robinson believes requires an emotional reading to understand, and by drawing similarities between Henry James’s work and Stein’s *Q.E.D.*, Giesenkirchen gives me a base from which to read *Three Lives* as an emotional text.

In my first reading of *Three Lives*, I will attempt to illustrate how Gertrude Stein, through repetition, is able to illustrate a character’s experience of James’s assertion that no two thoughts may be the same, therefore forcing the reader to experience James’s stream of consciousness theory as well. In my repeated reading of *Three Lives*, I will attempt to illustrate that *Three Lives*, as a novel of the kind Robinson discusses, requires of the reader an emotional response to differentiate between the repetitions, a response that is complicated by repetition itself rendering a kind of numbness in the reader.

Repetition, in the *Poison Principle*, is employed to demonstrate the present consciousness of the character, but Stein utilizes various forms of repetition. The narrator, as well as the character, repeats and repeats, and though many instances of the narrator’s repetition

appear to be directly linked with the character, the present consciousness of the reader must also be taken into account. The continuity of time does not stop as I read *Three Lives*, and in being forced to read the same sentence I read five minutes ago, I am taken back to the past moment of my own life, as well as taken back to the past moment of the story. I have used “The Gentle Lena” to illustrate the Poison Principle, but other instances of this may be seen in “Melanctha.” While the Poison Principle concerns itself with the repetitive thoughts or actions of the *character*, the narrator often repeats words or phrases that operate in a different manner. Stein is still poisoning the reader, allowing a word or phrase to accumulate upon each recurrence, but the action, the physical act that distinguishes one recurrence from another, is missing. Rather than watch the character react to a recurrence, I, the reader, am the only one experiencing the repetition. I am left to my own responses to a repeated word or phrase to distinguish the differences in a recurrence. In the following section I will demonstrate further instances of the Poison Principle, but also contend with the repetition of the narrator, which does not operate in the same manner as the Poison Principle.

CHAPTER 3

“Melanctha” and “The Good Anna” and Poison and Echo Principles

“Melanctha,” the longest of the three tales in *Three Lives*, provides further examples of the Poison Principle. Melanctha Herbert is a young woman who is “always seeking rest and quiet” (62, 64, 65) and yet finds herself in precarious situations. The love triangle in “Melanctha” runs a parallel storyline to the three women in the Q.E.D, but in place of a third woman, Stein inserts a male character, Jefferson Campbell. Melanctha has a love affair with Jane Harden, another woman, and then falls for Jefferson Campbell, her sick mother’s doctor, eventually moving on to a man named Jem Richards. The story ends with Melanctha falling ill of consumption and dying.

The story opens with a description of Melanctha helping her friend Rose Johnson take care of her newborn baby. The reader is told that Melanctha “did everything that any woman could” (59). When Melanctha’s mother falls ill later in the tale, the reader is told that “[Melanctha] did everything that any woman could, she tended and soothed and helped her pale yellow mother [...] and her mother never cared much for this daughter” (77). Following this statement, the next paragraph begins “Melanctha did everything that any woman could,” and two pages later the reader is told that “Melanctha really did everything that any woman could. Melanctha’s mother never liked her daughter any better” (80). “Melanctha certainly did everything, all the time, that any woman could,” appears eight pages later and is the last instance of this phrase.

While these phrases are almost identical, they contain minor differences. Melanctha first “did everything that any woman could,” and then later “really did everything that any woman

could,” until finally she “certainly did everything, all the time, that any woman could.” The addition of “really” and then “certainly...all the time” marks the rising degree to which Melanctha has “done everything that any woman could.” Taking care of the sick requires a kind of repetition of action, as one who is sick needs repetitive care, such as being fed, helped to the restroom, and various other tasks. These tasks are not explicitly described; rather the narrator implies the action. The Poison Principle illustrates the ways in which a character, though apparently experiencing the same action or thought, is actually experiencing a different action or different thought according to James’ assertion that no two identical thoughts may be the same.

What I mean to lay stress on is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. (James 154)

As Melanctha’s mother is slowly being poisoned with sickness, Melanctha herself, through the repeated action of caring for her mother, operates as an example of the Poison Principle. Just as Lena rubs her finger harder on her dress, Melanctha “really” and then finally “certainly...all the time” cares for her mother. As her mother becomes sicker, Melanctha’s actions become more frequent, and while they appear the same, the recurrences must constantly contend with the continuous present.

Similarly Jefferson Campbell would sometimes “rub the back of his dark hand over his mouth, and in between he would be frowning with his thinking, and sometimes he would be rubbing his head hard to help his thinking” (83). The reader is told that Jefferson Campbell

repeats this action while he and Melanctha sit with one another, often in silence. Much like the Poison Principle and “never knew,” the language implies actions that are not explicitly stated in the text. As Jefferson and Melanctha begin to know one another better, the reader is told that Jefferson Campbell was “smiling, and he was rubbing the back of his black-brown hand over his mouth to help him in his smiling. Then he was thinking, and he frowned and rubbed his head hard, to help him in his thinking” (96). While the text only states these two instances of Jefferson Campbell frowning and rubbing his head, the language states that the action “sometimes” takes place, suggesting continuity in the action.

The character’s “thinking” physically manifests itself through the action of frowning and rubbing his head. This action takes place during Melanctha and Jefferson’s alone time, and as their relationship progresses the action changes, which represents the changes in their present. Jefferson no longer simply rubs his hand over his mouth, but “rubs his hand over his mouth to help him in his smiling.” The identical action is a result of thinking, but since no two actions or thoughts may be the same in our present because of past experience, Jefferson is now “smiling,” now seeing, now hearing, now recollecting, carrying with his thought the newly acquired knowledge of his feelings for Melanctha.

When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relationships from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. (James 156)

The reader is told in a variety of ways that “Melanctha wondered often how it was she did not kill herself when she was so blue” (60, 62, 160, 161, 167). The first two instances of this phrase appear in the beginning of the tale, when the reader has yet to know Melanctha, whereas the last two instances appear near the end of the tale. In the first instance Melanctha relays the story of another woman killing herself to her friend: “Melanctha told Rose one day how a woman whom she knew had killed herself because she was so blue. Melanctha said, sometimes she thought this was the best thing for her herself to do” (60). The phrase itself is almost poetic, rhyming “blue” and “do,” and this first instance Melanctha is relaying her own concerns to another.

A page later she “wondered often how it was she did not kill herself when she was so blue. Often she thought this would be really the best thing for her to do” (62). Stein once again rhymes “blue” with “do,” making the phrase sound like a strange religious chant. In this second instance, Melanctha is no longer concerned with the story of another, but “wondered often” to herself. As in the case of Lena, the word “often” suggests a continuous presence of the thought.

The phrase disappears for a hundred pages, and in these hundred pages Melanctha experiences a variety of hardships and joys, but as her relationship with Jem Richards falls apart Melanctha again shares her thought with Rose Johnson: “Then Melanctha would get very blue and she would say to Rose, sure she would kill herself, that certainly now was the best way she could do” (161). The repetition of the rhyme, as well as the content of the thought, takes on a chanting quality, as if the thought itself is poisoning Melanctha while the rhyme begins to poison the reader. Already the chant has seeped into my own present, stuck in my head like a creepy nursery rhyme. Melanctha wants to kill herself because she is so blue; she feels certainly that this is the best way she could do.

“And Melanctha Herbert never really killed herself because she was so blue, though often she thought that would be really the best way for her to do,” appears on the last page, only three sentences away from the end of the story. This thought represents the same kind of concern that Lena feels for the poison—it continues to haunt Melanctha throughout the course of her life. The act of speaking this thought, that the first and third instances of the phrase are spoken aloud, suggests not just the continued existence of the thought itself, but the importance of the thought in the mind of Melanctha.

Thus far we have looked at instances of the Poison Principle, but not all repetition is created equal; there are varying forms of repetition, and each form requires a different approach. The characters experience repeated thoughts and actions, but the reader must also experience a repeated phrase to which the character is not privy, told over and over by the narrator. The reader is left only to his or her own reactions, his or her own ability to distinguish the difference in what appears to be an identical word or phrase.

Melanctha is described by the narrator as having “break neck courage” (63, 66, 68, 72). This exact phrasing is used five times in ten pages. Here Stein employs what I’m calling, to distinguish it more clearly from the Poison Principle, the Echo Principle. The Poison Principle is an overarching principle that explores the way Stein poisons the reader through repetition, seen most clearly when the character experiences repeated thought that is accompanied by an action, but the Echo Principle may operate as a *type* of Poison Principle, that must be differentiated because the repetition is privy only to reader, rather than character.

The Echo Principle operates by telling the reader again and again a quality of the character that will reverberate over the course of the story. Rather than having a character

express a repeated thought or action, the narrator throws description out, and allows the word to echo back throughout the tale, bouncing off the new context the reader has been given about the character, allowing it to be absorbed into our consciousness. Stein insists upon a trait of the character, placing emphasis on the same description in varying parts of the story.

The phrase “breakneck courage” is highlighted by the appearance of the word “courage” without the qualifier “breakneck.” By repeating this specific phrase the narrator highlights repetition itself, and each time I read that Melanctha has “break neck courage” I am forced to relive the previous instances in which I have been told of this courage. Stein forces the reader to experience the same phrase, and yet this phrase cannot be the same because the reader’s understanding of Melanctha’s break neck courage has changed due to the information the reader now has about the life of Melanctha. The narrator, throughout the three tales, often repeats qualities of the characters in this manner.

“Anna led an arduous and troubled life,” appears three times over nine pages in Stein’s tale “The Good Anna.” Anna is a servant and head of the household for a lazy, rich, woman who relies on Anna to take care of her home and person. Anna is not only in charge of the woman, but also in charge of the other servant girls she hires and fires throughout Part I. The initial appearance of the phrase sits on the first page of the story, and appears lastly on the eighth page of the story, reading, “You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (Three Lives 10). The last appearance of this phrase now includes the words “you see,” as though calling that the reader recognize the ways in which the reader has seen that Anna led an arduous and troubled life.

By repeating the same phrase three times, the narrator forces the reader to relive the ways in which she has shown Anna's life to be troublesome. As James claims:

What I wish to lay stress on is this, *that no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. (James 154)

Now I am seeing, now hearing, now recollecting the ways in which Anna has led a troubled life. Upon every reading of this phrase, I fall back to page one of the story, where the first instance of the sentence sits separated from paragraphs, directly in the middle of page one. The sentence exists already in my memory, and by bringing the sentence itself back to my present I am forced to relive my past reading of it. My present consciousness is interrupted by a past thought, but its interruption relies entirely on the repetition. The sentence already existed in my past and then present consciousness, and by forcing me to acknowledge the existence through repetition, repetition Stein is able to force awareness of the past in my present.

Much like Lena's worry takes on a new meaning each time she experiences it, with each reading of the phrase, "Anna led an arduous and troubled life," the reader experiences a new meaning from the same words. In the first instance, the reader knows nothing of Anna, thus the phrase can only be taken at face value. But as each page is turned the reader experiences the ways in which Anna's life becomes more troubled, so by the third instance of the phrase the reader brings a new meaning to the same words. Just as Lena's final worry about the poison carries with it the conversation and teasing of the girls, the reader's final reading of the phrase

has now the weight of the instances in which Anna's life has been troubled. You see, like Heraclitus's stream, the reader may never step in the same past twice.

When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relationships from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. (James 156)

The narrator also repeats the phrase "the good Anna" throughout Part I of the story. In nine pages the phrase is used eleven times, not including the title of the story. Anna, however, is not always referred to as "the good Anna." Other characters in the story call her Annie, Miss Annie, Miss Anna, or simply Anna. The narrator, at times, calls her Anna, with no qualifier, thus when the narrator makes a point of calling her the "good Anna" the reader is reminded of the times she has been called good versus the times she has been given no epithet. The title of the story is also "The Good Anna," so with each repeating of the phrase the narrator highlights the title of the work. Anna, as a servant, is juxtaposed to the other servant girls who are given their own epithets at the end of the tale: the, "cheerful Lizzies, melancholy Mollies, the rough old Katies and the stupid Sallies" (12). Following this description is the last instance of the phrase "the good Anna."

Anna being good and referred to as good is a form of poison—Stein is still poisoning the reader with repetition—but whereas the reader is able to watch Lena's physical reaction to a recurring thought, or observe Melanctha think and express the desire to kill herself, when the narrator insists upon repeating the reader is left to his or her own experience with the repetition.

I am forced to re-experience the phrase alone, rather than with a character. Stein allows these qualities of the character to reverberate throughout the story, and in doing so is able to insist upon aspects of the character that are not explicitly stated.

Anna being good is something that continues to recur in the story, regardless of Anna's acts, which seem harsh at times. She complains about the servant girls and runs a strict schedule for her mistress, but the narrator still insists that she is good. Anna being good, a trait the narrator attaches to her from past actions, is insisted in the present consciousness of the reader. As the reader, I anticipate her future actions and assume her past actions based on the qualifier that she is good. By repeating the phrase the narrator is able to insist past and future actions in the present consciousness of the reader without ever actually acknowledging many of these past and future actions. In short, the narrator is able to create context for the reader that is not explicitly stated; in other words, the reader must fill in the gaps.

These varying forms of repetition have been, for me, a confusing experience. I've attempted to place the repetition of characters and repetition of the narrator into different principles, which seems to suggest itself that all forms of repetition are not the same—interesting alone, since repetition is about sameness. That repetition requires some degree of sameness, and yet can be discussed in terms of different types of sameness, leads me to a study of repetition as a literary device, not simply in Stein, but in the reader experience as a whole.

CHAPTER 4

Repetition

Why repeat? Why re-read? Why re-listen? The human desire to re-experience a thing already experienced must be, I have to conclude, a desire for familiarity. In attempting to decipher repetition in Stein, I find myself wanting to understand repetition. If we must bring something new to every repeated act or thought, if we accept that our stream of consciousness is ever-moving, the now constantly asserting itself, then repetition itself becomes an impossibility, because the now-ness is just that; the now-ness. And even a repeated experience must somehow contend with the now that is ever new.

I recently re-read Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and was struck by the repetition of the phrase "And so it goes." This phrase is inserted throughout the novel, and rather like Stein's repetition, poisons the reader upon each recurrence. Vonnegut utilizes repetition in varying ways, and I wonder if I can speak about other forms of repetition in terms of Stein's Poison Principle⁶. The study of repetition in *Three Lives* proves helpful for a prompt into repetition in other reading and writing, not just of Stein, but of all texts that utilize repetition as a device. But repetition cannot operate in the same manner in all texts. Even in Stein there are varying forms of repetition. I have distinguished differences in the Poison Principle and Echo Principles, and thus repetition itself becomes pertinent, and to recognize how repetition affects a reader we must attempt to recognize how repetition operates as a device.

George B. Moore focuses his study on Stein's *The Making of Americans*, but like myself, he finds a conversation on repetition necessary to his project. "The classical position on

⁶ In Vonnegut's *Slapstick* it is the phrase "hi-ho."

repetition,” Moore claims, “is that it reinforces or accumulates toward identity; the thing that repeats establishes its nature through this characteristic of repeatability” (138). Just as Stein employed the term “insistence,” Jacques Derrida terms repetition “iteration” or “iterability” (Moore 138). For Derrida, “Iteration in its ‘purest’ form—and it is always impure—contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration” (139). Similarly, Gilles Deleuze questions the existence of repetition, claiming “If repetition is possible it is due to a miracle rather than to law [...] If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law, which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws” (Moore 140). While Moore finds these studies useful to his project of recognizing identity through repetition, I am more concerned with the pleasure and displeasure of repetition, with the effect that countless iterations have not only on the meaning of a text, but on the *reader* as collaborator with that text.

“It is hardly possible,” Freud claims, “to persuade an adult who has very much enjoyed reading a book to re-read it immediately” (45). Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* suggests that repetition must be pleasurable, and this pleasure is why we desire repetition. Freud notes the desire for repetition during childhood—for example, hearing the same story again and again, but suggests that in adulthood, “Novelty is always the condition of enjoyment” (45).

I cannot say I have never, upon finishing a book, immediately turned back to the first page. The first time I read Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, I vividly remember setting the book down, and hardly a moment later, picking it back up, and beginning again. There is scarcely a book on my shelf that has not been read at least twice. I initially attributed this re-reading to my poor attention span; that to remember or to fully comprehend I must re-read, and this attempt to understand through repetition is conducive to how I’ve tried to understand Stein—

that repetition, rather than render a word meaningless, must render it *meaningful*. But the pleasure of repetition, not simply a desire for understanding, but a desire for *pleasure*, must also be a catalyst for this desire to repeat.

Repetition in literature goes beyond the localized repetition of words or phrases, but also lies in the reader's experience of re-reading, or repeating the same novel. Consciousness is ever moving, like that unstoppable stream, and the art of literature or film mimics the temporal reality of our present, but in re-reading we are able to accomplish what the physical world absolutely forbids; we are able to re-experience the past.

But as James asserts, and as the word itself entails, we are not experiencing like the first time we experienced—we are RE-experiencing, because even our approach to art must change with each re-reading, each re-telling of a story, due to our own past infringing on our experience of art. But I would argue that we do not re-read with simply the intention of gaining new knowledge. “The re-experiencing of a something identical,” Freud claims, “is clearly in itself a source of pleasure” (46).

When I read *Lord of the Rings* every Christmas break, I do not make a conscious decision to have a new experience with the book because of my own ever changing present. Rather, I read this series over and over because it is comforting, because I know what will happen, because it allows me to break the ultimate rule of the human experience; the chaotic nature of life itself, the unknown, is nonexistent, because even when Gandalf falls and all looks lost, I know in the end, all will be well.

The comfort of repetition, the comfort of knowing what will come next, is why repetition is pleasurable, but this pleasure must also contend with the desire to gain knowledge, that in

repetition of a word or phrase we come to understand the meaning of it. If repetition is pleasurable because it is comforting, and if repetition is simultaneously an attempt to understand, then it follows that understanding is itself pleasurable and a comfort. Gertrude Stein's own desire to repeat words and phrases then becomes just that; her *own* desire. But Stein's use of repetition as her own desire highlights the displeasure when reading Stein, because repetition in Stein is not the comfort I seek when re-reading *Lord of the Rings*. Each time Stein repeats a phrase it is jarring, it upsets my normal flow of reading.

Part of this interruption is due to my losing interest in the text, or rather, I struggle to pay attention. It is rather like having a friend that insists upon repeating the same story again and again, and as I come across instances of repetition, I feel rather like the exasperated friend who longs to claim, "I've already *heard* that one." James claims:

No one can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change. They simply go out; and to keep the mind upon anything related to them requires such incessantly renewed effort that the most resolute Will ere long gives out and lets its thoughts follow the more stimulating solicitations after it has withstood them for what length of time it can. (James 217)

Reading Stein requires of me a "most resolute Will," and in her later works I often find that my will does waiver, and while I may be reading the words on the page my mind is far from the text. James asserts that we cannot attend continuously to an object that does not change, but part of my project concerns itself with highlighting in Stein the differences in what appears to be identical; that nothing may be identical due to an ever moving present. I've focused on a novel that provides characters that live in a temporal world, and in this way I may recognize the

differences in identical thoughts, but much of Stein's writing does not contain characters or plot. And so, my mind wanders. When reading a word again and again I begin to think about the word itself, and fill in my own context associated with that word. But while repetition is a large part of why Stein's later works are associated with displeasure, it is not due to repetition alone.

A book I particularly abhor reading is Gertrude Stein's 1931 work *How to Write*. It appears, at first glance, a nonsensical series of words, phrases, and ideas, often repeated and rarely following one another logically, but upon further inquiry the book may become, as the title suggests, a book on how to write, or rather, a book on how to write and read Stein. In the second section, titled "Sentences and Paragraphs: A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is," Stein dissects and upsets the reader's preconceived notions of the sentence, and not merely of the sentence as a form of writing, but the sentence as a form of communication. Fragments and run-ons litter the chapter, words are repeated within the same sentence, and an attempt to combine these sentences for the purposes of constructing an overall meaning is, in a sense, futile, because the project itself isolates words and sentences with the intention of isolating words and sentences; the words and sentences are not meant to be combined, but are meant to exist simultaneously apart and a part of one another. Meaning, then, is found in words alone. By isolating these words and phrases Stein enables the word to become *meaningful*, rather than meaningless. Meaning is found in form, as well as content, but as we'll see, the content of the form.

The subtitle "A Sentence is not emotional a paragraph is," says it all, as they say. A sentence is a detached thought—removed from the context of its origin, a sentence becomes or can become nothing more than what it is. When Stein writes, "A sentence should be arbitrary it should not please be better (26)," she suggests that a sentence, once removed from its context,

can be nothing more than an “arbitrary” grouping of words. The OED defines “arbitrary” as “to be decided by one’s liking; dependent upon will or pleasure; at the discretion or option of any one.” Arbitrary, then, becomes an appropriate word for the sentences of Stein—written for her pleasure.

The sentence, in isolating itself from the context of the paragraph, though it appears meaningless, actually gains a greater or fuller meaning in its isolation, because the reader, rather than ruminate on the context of the sentence by comparing it to the paragraph, must attempt to experience the sentence for nothing more than what it is—much like the reader must do when forced to read the same word over and over. Stein stresses the same idea when she writes each sentence that seems out of place or lost in its surroundings.

The sentence “It is a pleasure to play with a dog” appears pointless, meaningless, and arbitrary when considering the sentences that surround it, and its seemingly random placement is meant to make it appear exactly that. The reader is left to fill in the gaps of understanding. These gaps are not simply gaps of reference, in that the reader has likely played with a dog and can recognize why one would find it pleasurable, but these gaps are also emotional, in that the memory of playing with a dog may incite in the reader a kind of joy or longing. The sentence itself is not emotional, but the missing context of the paragraph is emotional. Stein, rather than give examples of her own experience playing with a dog, simply states that it is a pleasure to play with the dog, leaving the reader to access his or her own ideas of pleasure when playing with a dog. By allowing the reader to create the context, or fill in the gaps, by accessing his or her own ideas of what playing with a dog may be, Stein, through no paragraph or context of her own, allows the reader to access a well of images and thoughts associated with the idea of playing with a dog.

Stein's love of her dog is well known, and this biographical information, though not directly related to my discussion, forces me to consider why Stein chooses the sentence "it is a pleasure to play with a dog" to sit in isolation from context. The associations I make when playing with a dog are positive, but not every reader would have this reaction. For another, the memory of playing with a dog may be unpleasant, or frightening, and in this way Stein's own emotional associations when playing with a dog may not be conducive to her reader's association. But this, it seems, is precisely the sort of collaboration required for comprehension. If we're to find meaning in Stein's work through James's stream of consciousness, then we must not look simply at the object, or simply at our experience, but at our experience with the object—and so the reader's experience with Stein's sentence, though the context may differ, must contend with the object itself, the sentence, that claims the act of playing with a dog pleasurable.

Repetition is frequent throughout *How to Write*, poisoning the reader as in Stein's other works, but the difference may lie in the fact that the book itself is a guide on writing, or at least presents itself as such, and thus the repetition is at times acknowledged by Stein, and even explained, a rarity in the case of Stein. Though, as always, the explanation itself requires further explanation, and as readers we are left to fill in the gaps of meaning from our own understanding.

In the section on sentences, two instances of a word repeated consecutively in a sentence sit parallel to one another on separate pages. In the first instance Stein writes, "They made made them when they were by them. This is a sentence. It has no use in itself because made is said two times" (26). The repetition of the word "made" renders the sentence "useless," or as Stein puts it, "has no use in itself." In some sense, this is an ironic observation. The sentence, even without the repetition of "made," is difficult to comprehend. "They made them when they were

by them,” isolated from a paragraph, is useless without some degree of context—who is Them? They? How could “they” make “them” if they were by “them” while making “them?” We do not know if “they” are the same group of people as “them,” or even who “they” or “them” may be in relation to the idea of one having “made” the other. But the difficulty in reading this sentence further perpetuates the theories previously discussed regarding Stein’s insistence to isolate sentences from their context. The reader is left to fill in the gaps. The repetition of the word “made,” and Stein’s acknowledgment that this repetition upsets the usefulness of the sentence, not necessarily the meaning of the sentence, is what is particularly interesting to me. By acknowledging that the repetition of a word could render a sentence “useless,” we begin to see why a work like *How to Write* is not seen as pleasurable.

In a novel a reader may expect a certain amount from a sentence. The reader may expect a sentence to perpetuate a plot, describe a character, provide facts, or any number of possibilities that would make the sentence “useful” to the story. Usefulness, in a sentence, then becomes its ability to carry on the story or to convey information. In this way, Stein’s sentences in *How to Write* becomes useless, but as Koestenbaum claims “Why write, Stein suggests, except to please yourself?” (325). Pleasure is not typically a feeling we associate with utility. Pleasure in Stein becomes *her* pleasure, rather than the reader’s pleasure, but the reader may access his or her own pleasure through Stein’s pleasure. Stein purposefully upsets the reader’s presuppositions concerning sentences, insisting upon the present sentence, and this is, in a sense, pleasurable, because it allows a freedom when reading Stein; it allows us to focus on what is before us, and not what came before it. For what came before it is already in our present, because it exists already in our past.

Stein—by acknowledging that the repetition of the word “made” renders the sentence useless—comments on the confusion or upset caused in the reader by a repeated word—or rather, she acknowledges the reader’s presuppositions concerning the sentence as a form, or what the reader has come to expect when reading a sentence. On the next page Stein writes, “She mentioned edging edging is used in having sewing surrounding something. It is very difficult to think twice” (27). For Stein then, it seems the difficulty in repetition for the reader, any reader, including herself, is not merely the act of reading a word twice, or how that repeated word upsets preconceived notions of a sentence, but rather that the repeated word forces us to think twice. Revisiting the same word, without interruption, is a different experience than revisiting the same word or phrase after having been removed from that word or phrase, if only by a few sentences. In those few sentences, we experience, as William James asserted, a new present consciousness, and with that ever-moving stream of consciousness comes the weight of new memory, new thought that we must attach to the same word, making the word itself no longer the same as it once was when we first read it, as was the case with Lena’s worry.

But what then are we to make of a word repeated consecutively, that can carry no new idea or memory? When Stein claims, “It is very difficult to think twice,” following the consecutive repetition of a word, we are led to believe that the difficulty in thinking twice must apply to this consecutive repetition, rather than kind of repetition previously seen through James. Repetition of the same word, however, is not a novel idea of Stein’s, but a custom used by many religions: chanting, meditation, and prayer.

While J.D. Salinger does not use repetition as a device in writing, he writes about repetition in the “Franny” section of his novel *Franny and Zoey*. Franny, a young woman, explains to her boyfriend the importance of repetition in and for religion. In Christianity, she

explains, the prayer is “Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In the Nembutsu sects of Buddhism, “Praises to the Buddha,” and in India, she claims, it is the “Om.”

[...] if you keep saying that prayer over and over again—you only have to just do it your lips at first—then eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self-active. Something happens after a while. I don’t know what, but something happens, and the words get synchronized with the person’s heartbeats, and then you’re actually praying without ceasing...I mean you do it to purify your whole outlook and get an absolutely new conception of what everything’s about. (Salinger 37)

James defines habit as “nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, by which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape” (137). He goes on describe the exhaustion and misery of the human being in whom nothing is habitual—if walking, lighting a cigar, or any other mundane action were “subjects of express volitional deliberation” (146). Salinger’s character Franny is taking the conscious act of prayer, which is a deliberate act, and expounding on the benefits of turning it into habit, where consciousness of the present is stalled by the repetition of the same phrase or word over and over and over again.

But is this possible? James says that:

What I wish to lay stress on is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*[...]when the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relationships from those in which it last appeared. (James 154, 156)

It’s not that the repetition of the word or phrase renders it meaningless; it’s that when the repetition of the word or phrase begins, we make associations with it—repeating the same word

consecutively, my brain forces itself to acknowledge every memory or tangential thought that is connected with the phrase or word. Eventually, however, if repeated enough times, the word or phrase would cease to take on new meaning. Not that the word would become meaningless, but it could no longer, if repeated long enough, have new meaning. The word would instead be *full* of meaning. In this moment, and only in this moment, could I fully understand the meaning of the word, because every avenue of understanding would have been explored, would have been forced upon me, during the act of repetition.

Stein explores the meaning of the word “suffer” in the tale of “Melanctha,” a character who experiences much suffering. In a passage Stein writes:

In tender-hearted natures, those that mostly never feel strong passion, *suffering* often comes to make them harder. When these do not know in themselves what it is to *suffer*, *suffering* is then very awful to them and they badly want to help everyone who ever had to *suffer*, and they have a deep reverence for anybody who knows really how to always *suffer*. But when it comes to them to really *suffer*, they soon begin to lose their fear and wonder. Why it isn't so very much to *suffer* when even I can bear to do it. (*Three Lives* 132, italics mine)

Although the word “suffer” is not repeated consecutively, Stein’s form of writing highlights the word through repetition, but also through the unintelligibility of the phrases between. Upon reading this passage aloud, I stumble over phrases such as “these do not know in themselves” and “anybody who knows really how to always.” Reading Stein is rhythmic, and I’m forced to break my normal rhythm of reading while reading this passage. Instead of the steady musical

flow, like drum beats, Stein forces a choppiness upon me. By repeating the word, Stein forces me to truly consider the word itself, and in child-like pleasure I am able to repeat.

But despite the theoretical pleasure one may get from repetition, we must still contend with the displeasure associated with reading Stein. Consciousness is experiential, and while we can discuss the pleasures that should or could be associated with repetition, the fact remains that by forcing her readers to re-experience in his or her own present consciousness, Stein's work causes frustration and in many, disgust. Suffering through Stein creates a problem; if the emotional reaction we have to Stein is frustration at the language, and at repetition, which creates a numbness, then we presumably, according to James, cannot fully recognize the difference between identical recurrences in our own present consciousness.

In the next section, I will re-read the previously read sections of *Three Lives*, and attempt, in a repeated reading, to deduce how my own differing emotions from one recurrence to another help me recognize the difference in the repeated thought, while also contending with the frustration and numbness caused by repetition. If Koestenbaum is right to claim that we must think only of the sentence being read, and Stein claims that a sentence is not emotional, but a paragraph is, reading repetition in Stein and attempting to catalogue an emotional response creates a conundrum.

CHAPTER 5

Emotion

My inspiration to elucidate Stein through an emotional reading is motivated by James's assertion that our difference of emotion is how we may best recognize that a recurrence must be approached as something new. While the difference may lie in our past experiences, our ability to recognize the change is through emotional reactions, reactions that James claims are contingent on a physical response. My argument is as follows:

In Chapter 1, I showed that Gertrude Stein's use of repetition forces the reader to physically experience William James's stream of consciousness, which states that no recurring thought, though seemingly identical, may be identical due to a continuous present constantly changing from past experience. Now I consider that William James states that this change may be best recognized by a person's difference of emotion. And I conclude that we, as readers, may best recognize how Gertrude Stein forces the reader to physically experience William James's assertion that identical recurrences cannot be the same by our different emotional reactions to each recurring phrase or instance.

Karin Cope describes her initial reaction to Stein's *Three Lives* as "almost immediately, I was horrified. And then infuriated" (8). Cope was in her first year at university, and like many of Stein's readers, including myself, *Three Lives* was her introduction to Stein. Cope recalls telling her friend that *Three Lives* was "the stupidest thing I had ever read!" (8), and I cannot say that my initial reaction was much different. I recall telling a friend that Stein read like a story I had written in grade school, but, like Cope, as I continued to read, I found myself engulfed in the rhythm of Stein. For Cope, admitting that the piece had engaged her took a year or two; for

myself, by the time I had finished *Three Lives* I was telling my professor that Stein read like a story I had written in grade school and it was incredible.

While I came to love *Three Lives*, I cannot say the same for Stein works like *Lucy Church Amiably* and certainly not *How to Write*. My experience with *Three Lives*, and the attempt to interpret repetition through James's stream of consciousness, brings me to a discussion of emotion. I have yet to find the critic that describes Stein as emotional writing. Moore grants that Stein is concerned with the emotions, but to see the writing itself as emotional requires that we contend with the numbing quality of repetition. James claims that:

The difference of sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about things from one age to another, or when we are in different organic moods. What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. (James 156)

In her book *Deeper than Reason*, Jenefer Robinson claims that we, as readers, make not just causal inferences—such as when a character appears in a different setting out of breath we may infer that he or she ran there—but that we also fill in emotional gaps, and that this emotional response alerts us to important information about character and plot that is also not explicitly stated in the text (120).

“Nothing else,” Robinson claims, “can do the job that emotions do. Without appropriate emotional responses, some novels simply *cannot* be adequately understood” (107). Robinson uses *Macbeth* to illustrate the ways in which an emotional reaction may help the reader to fully comprehend a text. She claims that repulsion for Macbeth and his actions helps the reader to recognize Macbeth as a “man who has put himself outside the norm of human conduct, denied his humanity, and isolated himself from the rest of mankind” (112). Our emotional reaction

gives us a deeper understanding, alerting readers to the fact that Macbeth has violated a value system that is important to us. By filling in the emotional gaps we can more accurately decipher Macbeth's character.

We hear the same note over and over again, and as James asserts, the change, or "difference of sensibility" seems to rely on our emotional response to what appears to be the same thing, and this emotional response is contingent on our past consciousness being ever-present in our present consciousness—in short, filling in the emotional gaps with the past. We are, as James claims, carrying the weight of memory, so each experience must be affected by all previous memories. We could not feel repulsion for Macbeth without some context of our own, and just as we may recognize the differences in identical phrases through the different emotions of the characters, we may recognize these differences by our own emotional response to the text.

I previously argued that Stein's writing creates a physical experience of James's stream of consciousness for both the character and the reader, but this physicality, for James, is reliant on emotional response, a response James claims must manifest itself physically. In this section, I will attempt to explicate how Stein's *Three Lives*, as a text that forces the reader to physically experience William James's stream of consciousness through repetition, can be understood by filling in the emotional gaps of the reader.

It is first necessary to outline James's theory of emotion, frequently cited by philosophers like Noel Carroll and Robinson that work in the aesthetic branch of philosophical argument. James claims that "the feeling, in the coarser emotions, results from the bodily expression" (352). Rather than cry as a result of feeling sad, James claims we cry and this physical response alerts us to the fact that we are sad. While Carroll and Robinson both disagree with the order of

James's theory, they still grant that a physical response is somehow part of the emotional experience. Whether the physical reaction occurs before or after the cognitive processes of our brain classify something as an "emotion," however, is not necessarily relevant to this project. Simply that physical reaction is part of the emotional experience is my concern.

James claims that works of art may "arouse intense emotion; and whenever they do so, the experience is completely covered by the terms of our theory [which] requires that incoming currents be the basis of emotion" (359). In short, art acts as the object to which we are emotionally responding. When dealing in the realms of emotional reaction to literature, however, I must acknowledge some problems.

As Jenefer Robinson notes in the first section of *Deeper than Reason*, "For thousands of years people have assumed that there is some special deep connection between emotion and the arts" (1). In Western thought the arts and emotion have been linked since Plato's *Republic*, which claimed poetry influences people by appealing to their emotions, and Robinson's project concerns itself with the nature of this emotional response, taking for granted that a connection exists. Of literature and its connection with emotion, Robinson defends reader-response theory, claiming that for particular realistic novels, plays, and films, one must have an emotional response to fully understand the work itself.

I am inclined to believe Robinson, not only because of my own experience with various texts, but also because literature, an art form that explores questions of the human experience with such intimacy, cannot, I believe, escape "emotions," arguably the most confusing and least understood aspect of the human experience. My own project seems to support some form of reader-response theory, since my concerns primarily deal with how Gertrude Stein's use of

repetition affects the reader, but like Robinson I am troubled by this sort of work. Of the idiosyncrasy of each person's individual response, James claimed "And if we wish to feel that idiosyncrasy, we must produce the thought as it was uttered, which every word fringed and the whole sentence bathed in that original halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spread about its meaning" (Simon 234). To catalogue some degree of meaning based on my own reading is to isolate the text from another reader, and yet my own reading, my own emotional response, is the only response to which I truly have access⁷. A response to Gertrude Stein—typically one of frustration or even disgust—has been well catalogued by various critics, and while I do not have a detailed analysis of another reader's emotional response while reading Stein, I have my own, which I find reflects the sentiments of other readers.

My concerns then are as follows:

- 1) James claims emotional reaction is the best way to understand or recognize the difference between identical thoughts or instances in a continuous present.
- 2) Robinson claims that readers must fill in emotional gaps as well as causal and inference gaps to fully understand a text.
- 3) Stein's use of repetition frequently causes feelings of frustration or dislike, often creating a feeling of numbness in the reader.

How then, as a reader, am I to make sense of Gertrude Stein's use of repetition in *Three Lives* as a project that forces me to experience the theories of William James through repetition if

⁷ Simon claims that "no writer influenced by James came closest to creating this halo of obscure relations as well as his student Gertrude Stein."

repetition itself causes a numbness of emotion in the reader, or even frustration not at the characters, but at the use of repetition?

It is important to note that Robinson concedes that not all novels require this kind of emotional response to be fully understood, but *Three Lives*, as a novel that explores the kind of realist sentiments Robinson suggests requires an emotional reading, is, I will argue, one such novel. Robinson cites detective fiction, with stock characters, as an example of a type of literature that does not require any kind of emotional involvement, but this, to me, is a particularly problematic choice, since a genre such as detective fiction, with stock characters and stock plots, is itself a kind of repetition (137). I've already explored the ways in which repetition may be pleasurable, and suggested that this pleasure lies in knowing what will happen next. Genres of fiction that employ the same plot lines over and over, like detective fiction, are popular to a vast number of readers. I propose that this popularity is inspired in part by the same desire I have to re-read; readers may read *different* books and yet experience the same kind of comfort I enjoy while re-reading the same book.

This seemingly arbitrary example outlines my general problem when discussing repetition as emotional. My problem is that repetition itself renders a text un-emotional; thus, Robinson's assertion that detective fiction, a genre that is a kind of repetition, as un-emotional, further supports my theory. But if I wish to see Stein's work as emotional I must overcome or at least come to terms with the reader reaction to repetition as un-emotional. Before delving into an emotional reading of Stein, however, I will briefly note the problems with cataloguing an emotional response to art in the same vein as an emotional response to reality.

For the purposes of this project, I will take for granted that emotional reactions to literature are similar to emotional reactions to real life situations, but it is worthwhile to note that these reactions are not identical. In an essay titled “Fearing Fictions,” Kendall Walton claims that “Physical interaction is possible only with what actually exists” (234)⁸. Walton uses the following example to illustrate an emotional reaction to fiction: a man is watching a horror film and feels fear of a slime monster; he later claims that he was “terrified,” but acknowledges that he does not nor did he ever believe that he was in danger. Walton claims the man, to feel fear, is playing a kind of “make believe” game with himself to feel this fear (239). Similarly, Robinson proposes that:

We respond emotionally to literature as we do to life; we feel anxious, bewildered, relieved, amused, sympathetic and so on just as we do in real life. But there is an important difference between our emotional responses to life and to literature. In life we do not know what is coming next or whether things will work out; we cannot control our environment, and we cannot predict what is going to happen to us. (Robinson 219)

Robinson goes on to say that part of the pleasure in reading literature is the feeling that we have somehow coped with a piece of reality through our emotional response to something that is not actually reality. In my emotional re-reading of Stein I will accept that I am, as Walton suggests, playing a kind of make-believe game with myself to feel emotionally for the characters or situation, and that, like Robinson suggests, my emotional reaction is similar to or nearly the same as the reaction I have to reality. But when reading Stein there are two levels of emotion to

⁸ This essay appears in an anthology of essays titled *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, edited by Noel Carroll and Jinhee Choi.

contend with; 1) the emotional reaction I have to the characters and story, and 2) the emotional reaction I have to experiencing repetition.

The primary problem with reading Stein appears to be that the emotion readers feel is primarily frustration, not at the content of the novel, but rather at the way in which the story is being told. Karin Cope catalogues some reader reactions to Stein, and they are largely negative. One response to Stein's *Portrait of Mabel Dodge*, claims "After a hundred lines of this I wish to scream, I wish to burn the book, I am in agony...Someone has applied an egg-beater to my brain" (144). Similarly another reader claims:

Of course Miss Toklas says, 'Miss Stein always says what she means, etc.,' but it doesn't mean much and neither Miss Stein nor Miss Toklas can give these assertions a mystic significance. It is the arrested-development though of a grown person, repeating again and again, as does a child. (Copeland 48)

Annoyance then, or even agony it seems, is how some respond to Stein, and though works like *How to Write* require a different kind of patience, one that does not need characters and a story to continue reading, *Three Lives* still contains the kind of egg-beater to the brain repetition that has a tendency to render a text un-readable.

William James claims that:

If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feeling of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind[...]stopping the expression of the emotion often makes it worse. The funniness becomes quite excruciating when we are forbidden by the situation to

laugh, and anger pent in by fear turns into tenfold hate. Expressing either emotion feely, however, gives relief. (James 355, 359)

Just as Jefferson Campbell relieves his confusion by rubbing his head, I relieve my frustration at reading a word over and over in various ways. I shake my head; I raise my eyebrows; I put down the book; I sigh. I experience all these physical reactions in an attempt to alleviate my frustration with Stein, and in my re-reading of *Three Lives* I attempt to give way to my emotional reactions to the character with the same physicality. In trying to discover if my difference of feeling of emotion to the text is the best way to recognize how identical recurrences are not the same, I allow myself to look concerned, to appear sad, to laugh, to express my reactions physically, and in this way I am able to catalogue my responses, and understand the difference in recurrences.

CHAPTER 6

An Emotional Re-Reading of *Three Lives*:

I do not have an emotional reaction to the qualifier of “good” in the “The Good Anna” and I do not have an emotional reaction to the description of Melanctha’s “break neck courage.” The particular kind of the poison I receive from the repetition of the narrator—the Echo Principle—renders me numb, and though in my previous analysis of these instances I was able, through tedious and painstaking work, to see the Echo Principle through the lens of William James’s theory of consciousness, I find when I read that I only find a difference by looking for that difference, asserting again and again that there must be a difference. The differences in these identical recurrences are only forced upon me when I force them upon myself. The physical experience of James’s theory of consciousness has little to no emotional effect on me, thus the only way I am able to catalogue the differences in these instances of repetition are through acknowledging the fact that the story itself has progressed, that I have new knowledge of the ways in which Anna is “good” and Melanctha has “break neck courage.” James claims that the best way to discern the difference between two seemingly identical thoughts is through our changing emotions from one thing to another, and while I find that I do not have an emotional reaction to Echo Principle, I do have an emotional reaction to the character’s repetition—the Poison Principle—which seems to suggest that when I, as the reader, participate in repetition with the *character*, my emotional reaction enables me to grasp a fuller understanding and recognize differences in identical thought.

As Lena experiences worry about the poison and repeatedly rubs her finger on her dress, I find that I do pity her, and experience some form of the worry myself. For one, the phrase “the

other girls did tease her” creates a situation in which I draw upon my own experiences and am therefore able to better empathize with Lena’s position. Wayne Koestenbaum, in his book *Humiliation*, describes a situation in which he was insulted by a teacher (63). “I’ll wager” Koestenbaum claims, “that most human beings on earth—those of us who are not enlightened and may never become enlightened—hear such phrases, such humiliating refrains, every day, as the background music to our lives” (63). As James claims, the memory of an insult is often worse; it poisons our mind. For myself, I, like Koestenbaum, hear a litany of insults, teasings, and disparaging remarks in my daily life, and the memory of those moments is sometimes so strong, so embarrassing, that I often react again, shaking my head or placing my hands on my face. Just as Lena rubs her finger on the dress, I re-experience the moment again and again not simply through thought, but through physical action.

So as I read about Lena’s experience, I am moved emotionally. I feel for Lena, I furrow my brow in concern, and I am reminded of my own experiences. Each time Lena worries, my worry increases, because I can empathize with her concern. I am most moved when Lena expresses her final worry, after the girls have gone, because this, to me, is the worst part of shame; that we continue to experience it. In this moment, I feel anger on behalf of Lena. I shake my head in frustration not at Stein, but at the girls who have forced this kind of experience upon Lena.

I find that I also have an emotional reaction to Melanctha’s “blue.” In the first two instances, they are merely phrases. Though I do feel some form of pity, they feel an exaggeration. I do not know Melanctha, and while I sympathize with her being blue and wanting to kill herself, I do not react in a physical manner; it is simply a character trait of Melanctha’s. The last two instances, however, carry much more weight. I now feel that I know Melanctha,

and her failed relationships with Jefferson and Jem Richardson add only to this initial feeling of blue. Melanctha's thought sounds less like an idle, melodramatic threat, and more like a genuine feeling. In the third instance, I feel sad. I bring my hand to my mouth in an act of concern and sympathy, and in the last instance, I feel sadder, because I know that poor Melanctha, who wanted only understanding but found only trouble, is near the end.

Interestingly enough, I am reminded of William James's little sister, Alice James. Alice James expressed a desire to kill herself, and upon finding out that she was terminally ill wrote "To him who waits, all things come! My aspirations may have been eccentric, but I cannot complain now, that they have not been brilliantly fulfilled" (206). Alice felt relief that her mental pain had finally manifested itself into a physical condition, and I wonder if Melanctha is a case of much the same. Though I am sad when Melanctha dies from illness, I wonder if she does not feel relief, wanting all her life to kill herself because she was so blue.

There is a difference between the repetition experienced by the characters and the repetition insisted upon by the narrator—it is interesting that I have an emotional reaction to Lena's poison and Melanctha's blue, but I do not have an emotional reaction to the content of the qualifier good in Anna. This forces me to conclude that the Poison Principle is how we may best recognize James through Stein and Stein through James. While the Echo Principle may still help us decipher repetition as a means of exploring consciousness, because I do not have an emotional response to qualifiers, the character's repetition, rather than the narrator, becomes the easiest means by which I can *recognize* the differences.

The character's experiences bring to mind my own experiences, or the experiences of others, and by bringing this knowledge to the text I am able to better interpret the text itself.

Robinson claims this, and I concur. If I had never been teased, I could not fully comprehend Lena's predicament, and by accessing Alice James as a source, I'm able to better understand Melanctha's character.

My emotional attachment to the characters enables me to have an emotional reaction, even to the repetition of phrases, which may render a kind of numbness in the reader, and though I previously suggested that numbness in itself created a problem for my reading, I wish to suggest that frustration at the form may still operate as a means of recognizing the difference.

James claims that our difference of emotion from one age to another is how we may best recognize the difference in identical recurrences, and the increasing frustration, the cumulative poisoning of Steinian repetition, that may, I grant, render a kind of numbness, is still proof itself of James's assertion. I grow more frustrated, more exasperated with Stein, and that my frustration increases acts as a proof that when I read the last instance of a recurrence, it is far different from the first time I read the word. In other words:

What I wish to lay stress on is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. (James 154)

Or in other words:

When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relationships from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of

it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. (James 156)

Or in other words:

The difference of sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about things from one age to another, or when we are in different organic moods. What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. (156)

Even in the time you have read *this* work and in the time I have re-read sections of *Three Lives*, a continuous present requires that each approach will be new; that each approach now carries the experience of all previous approaches and must therefore change, and this change of emotion to an identical recurrence is itself the best way to recognize a continuous present.

CONCLUSION

Wayne Koestenbaum claims of reading Stein, that:

You won't ever have time to read all of Stein (there will always be more manuscripts, more letters), she will forever exceed you grasp, resist enclosure, and permit you, therefore, to reserve and foil your own grasping readerly gestures. Reading Stein is always reading in a void, reading the void, reading to avoid—to avoid plot, significance, work, pain, and the past. (311)

I echo Koestenbaum's sentiments, emphatically, in that I feel a lifetime of study would still render Stein a mystery to me. Koestenbaum's assertion that "reading Stein is always reading in a void, reading the void, reading to avoid—to avoid plot, significance, work, pain, and the past" is, as I've noted, a kind of Steinian repetition, and just as Karin Cope felt it necessary to begin her work with a Steinian poem and Koestenbaum found the best description to be the repetition of the word "void," I have found that repetition was necessary to my project; that to understand Stein's writing I had to adopt a bit of Stein's style as well. I've repeated passages, phrases, and words to assist in my analysis of repetition in Stein. I have suggested there is possibly no other writer whose criticism encourages, and for many requires, that the criticism itself reflect the style of the writer, and this, to me, speaks to Stein's importance in the canon; that her work is so unique, so complex, that it inspires criticism that reflects the style.

This project alone has suggested to me that even a lifetime of study of repetition in Stein would not be enough to explore the varying aspects of this in her books. I merely explored two kinds of repetition, but I cannot help but feel there are many more principles to name, and many different ways to understand them. The Poison Principle is how I most clearly understand

Gertrude Stein through William James, and William James through Gertrude Stein, but what of the, yet to be termed, Suffer Principle? Is William James the best way for me to figure out the particulars of the language between the word “suffer” in the passage from Melanctha? What of the Principle Principle, where Stein repeats a word directly after a word?

Reading Stein is acknowledging the present, again and again, and each present must change with each reading. With a writer who acknowledges and explores issues of consciousness, there could never be enough to say, because consciousness, like Heraclitus’s stream, is ever moving, ever changing, ever growing, and so my reading of Stein is ever moving, ever changing, ever growing, just as my reading of any work is ever moving, ever changing, ever growing. Stein forces the reader to re-experience within her text, thus re-experiencing the text itself will always render new results.

Maybe DJ Spooky saw something similar in Stein, because the presentation recognizes Stein as an experience—that we are not meant to be passive consumers when reading Stein, we are meant to collaborate with her. As I listen again to the accompaniment of Stein reading with those repetitive beats, I find myself entranced by the repetition and the rhythm. And when Stein tells me to “now actively repeat it all, now actively repeat it all, now actively repeat it all,” despite the frustration and despite the confusion, I find myself replying, “Okay, okay, okay.”

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