Sarah Posman and Laura Luise Schultz, eds. *Gertrude Stein in Europe. Reconfigurations Across Media, Disciplines, and Traditions*

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Gertrude Stein in Europe focuses on Stein’s being an American “deterritorialised” body living in Europe with a double identity. As this volume shows, Stein’s oscillation between two different continents is reflected in her work and as Catharine R. Stimpson notes “[T]his doubleness shaped the flux, flow, and fragilities of her genius” (ix). As a result, Stein’s work demands both a second reading and a “double focus” (6), which is what the contributors of this collection wish to suggest.

The volume does not treat Stein as an expatriate writer, but as an American writer who was “almost French,” (3) living, thinking and writing in a pluralist environment, a fact that makes it impossible to unwaveringly classify her. In the Introduction of the collection, the editors provide a twofold basis for the exploration of Stein’s project, that of identity and network; they refer to Stein’s own view of identity as “relational” (7) and as something that does not “distinguish oneself from others, but a question of how one relates to others” (7). As far as networking is concerned, the editors stress the fact that although Stein introduced herself as a genius, she recognized the need for interaction and reciprocity between the literary creation of the writer with the receptive ability of the reader.
The collection is divided thematically in three parts: “Stein Encounters,” “Mediations” and “Stein Encountered.” The first part traces a more philosophical and conceptual tone in her writings starting with Stein’s relation with phenomenology and pragmatism, her dialogue with Picabia, Duchamp, Picasso, and her involvement with politics as seen through her friendship with Bernard Faÿ. The essays of the second part reconsider Stein’s engagement with film, explore her cinematic writing and start from Stein’s relation to Bergson’s and James’s philosophy, connecting it with Deleuzean thought and combining it with Lacan’s view on identity. The last part of the volume offers a dialogue of postwar artists and writers with Stein in terms of translating her work and employing the dramatic form of her plays as groundwork for American and European twentieth-century drama.

The first section begins with Ariane Mildenberg’s “Stein and Lived Experience,” who explores Stein’s experimental writing as “an interrogation of language” (26) and how this questioning is similar to Merleau Ponty’s “hyperdialectic,” to Deleuze’s concept on rhythm in art and, Husserl’s work on lived experience. Mildenberg exposes “the inverted vision of verbal portraiture” in Stein’s work which as she explains Stein tries intentionally to conceal it through her linguistic experimentation, and argues that Stein aims to “reclaim the pre-predicative ground of experience from which language arises” (26). Moving on to the next essay, Mia You in “Picabia in Meditation” investigates Stein’s fascination with Picabia, especially in the 1930s, when Picabia would become her favourite artist, a position formerly held by Picasso. Mia You explores the references to Picabia in Stein’s writing and the influence of his concept on the “vibrant line” on her masterpiece Stanzas in Meditation. Mia You explains that Stein recognized in Picabia his effort to show movement in his works, an element that Stein also included through her “continuous present” and her sense of “completed incomplete” (64). Franziska Gygax in “Sitwell Edith Sitwell: Stein and Sitwell in Echo” explores the way that the relationship of the portraitist and the portrayed influences the “shifting balance between similarity and difference” (71) by comparing Stein’s portrait of Picasso (1923) and Edith Sitwell (1925). Gygax points out that in Stein’s portrait of Sitwell there is a sense of bonding and mutual understanding between the two women; on the other hand, Stein’s portrait of Picasso “displaces the avant-garde visual artist by taking over the role of the main figure in the text” (80). The fourth and last essay of this part, is “Triangular Politics: Stein, Bernard Faÿ and Elisabeth de Gramont,” by Birgit Van Puymbroeck. In this essay, Stein’s friendship with both the right-wing university professor Bernard Faÿ and the communist duchess Elizabeth de Gramont raises questions regarding her political beliefs and their influence in her writing. Van Puymbroeck recognizes the intersection of friendship and politics in Stein’s writings but she suggests that Stein was not interested in politics because its theories “are concerned with identity (“human
nature”) and not with the creation as pure movement (the “human mind”)” (97).

Sarah Posman inaugurates the second section of the volume with “Fluid Writing: Stein, James and Bergson.” The exploration of movement or flux in Stein alludes to both James’s “stream of consciousness” and Bergson’s “durée.” However, Posman explains that Bergson’s vertical as opposed to James’s horizontal thinking is closer to Stein’s perception. Posman also points out that Stein like Bergson “was in search of exactitude – what she called ‘passionate exactedness of meaning’” (120) and this careful choice of words would help her achieve the movement or the “fluid writing” she was aiming at. Isabelle Alfantary in “Becoming American, Becoming Agrammatical: Reading Stein with Deleuze” concentrates on Stein as a “deterritorialized writer” and on the fact that Stein’s writing can be seen as a variation or a foreign language. As Alfantary suggests, Stein’s dislocation from the US and re-location in 27 rue de Fleurus determine Stein’s place in the world. The use of English in a French environment by an American challenges the notion of “Americanness” and as Alfantary explains “one might say that for Stein, one is not born an American but one is made through the operation of language” (134). The two remaining essays of this part examine the dialogue of Stein’s writing with cinema; starting with “Stein and Cinematic Identity,” Abigail Lang offers readings of Stein’s two scenarios, “A Movie” and “Film,” suggesting that Stein comes in accordance with cinema’s element of movement and multiple identities. Lang also associates Stein’s relationship with cinema as a reconceptualization of Lacan’s mirror stage. Julian Murphet’s “In Theory: Stein and Film Philosophy” explores how Stein and twentieth-century film theory may come to conjugate. He draws parallels and associations with Bergson, Deleuze and Benjamin. A point worth mentioning is Murphet’s description of Stein’s text as “a laboratory or test facility for the detection of the ‘slightest variation’ (MA 294) amidst a monotonous pounding of repetition” (168). In other words, Murphet explains that Stein’s text itself is a cinema.

Moving on to the third and final section, Marie-Claire Pasquier’s “Concerning Gertrude Stein: Dreaming Translation” (trans. Alison Anderson) poses the question of whether Stein’s writing is “untranslatable.” Adding to this, since understanding Stein’s writing presupposes reading it aloud, how can this element be interpreted in a second language? Pasquier stresses the fact Stein uses the American idiom “as an oral language” (193) and this challenges potential translators of her work. In “Gertrude Stein and her Critique of Dramatic Reason” Andrzej Wirth (trans. d’onderkast) elaborates on Stein’s effort to deconstruct the notion of “standard plays” and offer a new perspective by using drama “metalanguage,” repetition in order to create “the impression of timelessness,” and shaping the plot by altering the syntax.
Wirth suggests that Stein’s use of dramatic time and repetition “creates a clear anticipation of the postmodern time conception in the works of Beckett and in the Theatre of Absurd” (209). Laura Luise Schultz in “The Missing Link: Stein between American and European Theatre” is also preoccupied with Stein’s position in twentieth century drama. Schultz explores Stein’s tendency to combine in her work both modernist and avant-garde elements, theatricality with anti-theatricality, deconstructing, as Wirth also suggested, every conventionality of dramatic writing. Analysing Hans-Thies Lehmann’s and Heiner Goebbels’s views, Schultz draws the conclusion that Stein “creates a virtual play between possible meanings in a complex time-space” (226) and she adds Stein’s writing has “no time—not timeless, but full of time—of no conclusions, no beginning, no end” (226). Tania Ørum in “A Trail of Roses-Gertrude Stein’s Multiple Legacies in 1960s Art” traces Stein’s influence in the Nordic avant-garde of 1960s. This is seen in the writing of the Swedish writer, Oyvind Fahlström, influenced by Stein’s linguistic experimentations. More examples of this legacy is John Davidson’s art exhibitions and Stig Brøgger’s films that describe people and situations “through small variations of words and sentences” (246). Florine Leplâtre’s “Portraitist Portrayed: Four Contemporary French Perspectives on Stein” similarly unveils the persona of Stein as depicted in the work of French artists and writers. More particularly, Bernard’s Heidsieck’s sound poem, Christian Prigent’s poetic essay, Arnaud des Pallières’s experimental film and Olivier Cadiot’s writing come in dialogue with Stein’s work and the theme of self-representation. The editors of the collection saved the outstanding essay “Gertrude Stein Grammaticus” by Jacques Roubaud for the end, an essay that not only refers to all Steinian stylics but also resembles the “genius’s” writing style. As Posman and Schultz explain in “Coda. How to Read?” Roubaud’s text is itself an exploration of how grammar and syntax operates and what their combination can offer to the readers.

Stein in Europe is a collection that opens fresh and new perspectives in the research of Stein’s literary oeuvre and offers new routes for further exploration. The majority of the essays break new ground in Stein’s work that demands a closer reading of her texts and an inevitable comparison with relevant artistic movements. There are authors in this collection that opt for a more traditional way of explaining Stein’s work through theoretical contexts (although Stein preferred to be considered as unclassifiable or rather a single category herself); nevertheless, it is done in a more open-minded way and paves the way for text to theory approach. All in all, Stein’s work will certainly not stop attracting attention and as the editors conclude “Read her, she’ll make you want to write,” (289) it is inevitable not to.
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