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# The Open Boat and the Shipwreck of the Singular: American Poetry and the Democratic Ideal

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# The Open Boat and the Shipwreck of the Singular: American Poetry and the Democratic Ideal

Elizabeth Willis

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We are all a little wild here.  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson to Thomas Carlyle  
 It is entirely wild, wildest / Where there is traffic  
 / And populace.  
 George Oppen

- 1 As we consider the nature of revolutions in trans-Atlantic literary history, I want to address something about the contradictory senses of subjectivity and self within American poetry. What does the intertwining of linguistic and legislative representation have to do with the way that singularities—in both George Oppen and Susan Howe’s sense of the term—are curiously connected with occasions when the self is radically expansive or blown apart ; that is, when a subject makes itself available to the construction—or reconstruction—of a reality beyond it.
- 2 This phenomenon seems to involve a compulsion to re-enact what has been inscribed in American history as an encounter between wildness and civilization ; a retelling or undoing of cultural history ; a performance of self that demands an ongoing rethinking of form. What do we, the belated beneficiaries of postmodernism, understand as our relation to history ? What did—or does—the revolution of a word mean ? How does poetry revolt, and how does it revolve ? Does it turn on its own axis, and if so, what is its relation to the diurnal commonplace of the humans who read and write it ?
- 3 Rereading Oppen, I’ve been struck by the extent to which his poems revolve around certain words and certain poets, the way he shakes off singularity through citation ; for instance, the way he carries on conversations with William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman in “Of Being Numerous” while insistently holding the poem in the present tense. The poem seems to *make* a world, then turn it. We recognize the ground—it’s our world too—but only as it shifts beneath our feet.

- 4 My sense is that American poetry has been propelled by—what shall we call it?—a trauma? a fantasy? of almost-simultaneous revolt and union, holding out—even as we critique it—the dream of a purposeful oneness among individuals of radically different genetic and narrative codes.
- 5 I want to pause here before the origin myth of American poetry, the decisive moment when it arrives at a vision of itself as a new thing, not just as a new location for poetry written in English, but as something else. I'm not talking about the formulation of America's founding documents but about the moment eighty or so years later when they could be thought of—and rewritten—as literary documents. When Walt Whitman pitched the singing of a self as an occasion for the constitution of a "we."
- 6 Of course the announcement of Independence and the instituting of a Constitution are performative uses of language that pull in opposing directions. We, plural, a shipwrecked and a savage people, choose to constitute a unity composed of our numerousness. We hold certain truths to be self-evident; which is to say, our concern is with the obvious. And the obvious, Oppen tells us, is no less than "the world" (185). We assert independence and must immediately build a civic structure that is bound to fail the explosive imperatives of its founding. This is the primary contradiction of the democratic text. It is, I think, why *contradiction* is such an important word in Whitman's lexicon and why *failure* is so central to Oppen's.
- 7 Next to the public self-assertion performed by the 1855 publication of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—the great do-it-yourself template for American poetry, unsanctioned by academic authorities or literary publishing houses—we might place Emily Dickinson's self-made fascicles and the distribution of her poems in private correspondence. Both poets wrestled with self-determination and context. Both tested the boundaries—the human reach—of the poem.
- 8 But for now, let's stay with Whitman to consider the public moment when American poetry begins to distinguish itself formally from the literary products of what was then a global empire; that is, when it constitutes itself as a counter-tradition. Whitman's endlessly revised poem (and, in many ways, the intentional indeterminacies of Dickinson's manuscripts) argues not only for its own self-determination but for self-determination as an ongoing act.
- 9 I'm speaking not so much of the self-determination of the poet as that of the poem, which, in effect, demands a sovereignty of its own. "Poetry," wrote William Carlos Williams, "is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas" (1954, 178). Poetry is, as Robert Duncan would assert a century after Whitman, a landscape in its own right: an enterable meadow, a workable ground. It is, as Dickinson composed it, volcanic. It is, in Gertrude Stein's hands, a "geography."
- 10 Whitman believed American poetry would develop organically, that it would "show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush" (10). Of course in his elegy for Lincoln, Whitman goes on to write the great poem of lilacs. And it is left to William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and other modernists to build the rose factories of the next century.
- 11 "Pow word," Stein writes, "a pow word is organic and sectional and an old man's company" (2012, 41). Pow! A condensed iteration of power. The word is meant to stun, to disorient, to knock out the reader.

- 12 Stein's rose turns in circles. Williams' rose explodes. It revolves, and it revolts, at the site of production.
- 13 In his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman explicitly blurs the distinction between poet and reader, reader and poem, poem and world, announcing that "your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body" (11).
- 14 This merger of figure and ground—of landscape and portraiture— is a poetic manifestation of what I would call the "democratic ideal." In linking the project of poetry with the project of democracy, Whitman established a measure toward which he believed American poetry must strive—and he often lamented its failure to reach it.
- 15 "Nuts," Stein writes some 60 years later in her portrait of "Americans": "when and if the bloom is on next and really really really, it is a team" (2012, 43).
- 16 Like Whitman, Stein had a strong autobiographical impulse that was often displaced and dispersed. Both were concerned with the nature of genius and the relation between genius, specialness, and the commonplace. American poetry—or what was most American about American poetry—would be a series of attempts. It would either be failing at being revolutionary, or failing at having an audience. Or both.
- 17 That, Stein writes, "is the reason why the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic" (1926, 9). American poetry would, to some extent, always revolve around this dilemma. We hear it voiced in Whitman's acknowledgment of his own poems' contradictions; in Oppen's "shipwreck of the singular"; in the grammatical reorientation of center and periphery produced by Stein's heightened attention to prepositions, articles, and conjunctions. We hear it in Susan Howe's explosive typography; in Nathaniel Mackey's tracking of fugitivity; and in Charles Bernstein's eruptive shifts between semantic depths and surfaces, to give just a few examples.
- 18 It may or may not be obvious that American poets of this idiosyncratic and non-conforming counter-tradition are repeatedly writing an account of their own making; that we—whoever we are—are often giving an account of, or grappling with formally, a history of revolutions and disasters, of lands arrived at in error or under duress. The story of a penal colony and a promised land, a waking up, an arrival, an occasion for re-invention, which is also and unequally the story of the Middle Passage, of compulsory heterosexuality, of stolen ground, of whole cities "of the corporations," and of state-sanctioned genocide, though these histories of violence are often discreetly—and discretely—encoded (Oppen, 163).
- 19 Here in the middle—or beyond the ending—is an American "we" that wants to believe in the possibility of repeated beginnings.
- 20 Stein: "Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series" (1926, 12).
- 21 In this serially reiterative America, a poet is Nobody and "Everyman." She is numerous and singular. He is Ulysses and Ishmael. An earnest, undependable, self-accusing, displaced witness to failure.
- 22 I want to pause for another moment to think about the obvious. About things that are declared to be self-evident. About what Gertrude Stein could see in America because

she was looking at it from France. But more broadly than that, about the fact that what is obvious to the poet may seem obscure—or beside the point—to the critic. And that what appears obvious to the critic may be the site of greatest mystery to the poet.

- 23 I want to reconsider Charles Olson's statement that space is the "central fact" of America and to place beside it the fact that he was unapologetically stating the obvious (17). He was saying I, Ishmael, a survivor of shipwreck and of madness, hold this truth to be self-evident.
- 24 Did Olson ever think of his maximalism in relation to Stein's ? I think they arrived at the same shore on different boats. I think in their moments of greatest genius, they both may have thought, like Crusoe, that they were alone.
- 25 Stein's *Tender Buttons* is, in many ways, the opposite of Olson's *Maximus*, but it too is thinking broadly and specifically about space, its poems organized according to the private and public textures of rooms ; the purchase, preparation, and consumption of food ; the cut of clothing against the contour of a body ; and of course the friction and slipperiness of words within a sentence. Her texts are full of places and things she is devoted to making us see differently, everyday givens that have become so self-evident we no longer see them. She begins her portrait of "Americans" with a three-word sentence : "Eating and paper" (2012, 39).
- 26 America is a composition about consumption. Anybody will tell you this. It is all about taking up space. The fact of space. The possibilities of—and, for the intruder, the anxieties generated by—unbounded space.
- 27 "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. / This is what makes America what it is," Stein writes in *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1995, 45-46). Like a page, this space is figured either as a landscape or as a portrait and, in its canonical representations, it is very very very very white. It is, in accordance with the literary forms of its most invasive species, in pursuit of whiteness, like a whale. It is an accumulation and intensification of whiteness, and it is a displacement. As Stein writes : "By the white white white white, by the white white white white white white, by the white white white white by the white by the white white white white" (2012, 45).
- 28 I hear this passage in conversation with Williams's "red wheel/barrow [...] / beside the white / chickens" (Williams, *CP* vol. 1, 1991, 224), but I also hear Stein addressing other problems of seeing, including issues of race and ethnicity that are inseparable from the basic formal construction of a self among others.
- 29 Where Williams's signature poem presents a study in contrasts that is at once commonplace and singular, Stein's white-on-white field insists and intensifies ; the reader has no way of delineating between figure and ground or, for that matter, between adjective and noun, single entity and crowd. Is the meaning of the passage obvious or obscure ? Or where is the boundary where it crosses between one and the other ?
- 30 What is the relation of Stein's highly aestheticized white field—her pointing to the removal of contrast and perspective—with the lived realities of what James Baldwin would address as the contractual status of whiteness, the lie of whiteness that is the price of becoming American ? "No one," Baldwin writes, "was white before he/she came to America. It took a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country" (136).

- 31 Is it freedom or coercion playing against its own echoes at the troubled center of Stein's "geographical history"? By placing whiteness beside itself within a non-conforming sentence, Stein pulls at the coercive function of conventional grammar and makes this whiteness visible and audible as a made thing; its meaning is not immutable, regardless of the reader's cultural, racial, or national identity. As with her often repeated "Rose is a rose is a rose," the line's content is at once unstable and richly obvious; what is commonly referred to as Stein's obscurity is, rather, the revelation of something the reader did not expect to see. Seeing what whiteness is, hearing what it says in black and white, begins by making conscious its cognitive delivery system, the interplay between eye and mind. Similarly the "or" of Stein's title uses an unexpected parallelism to mark the non-neutrality of history: even something that sounds as stable as a "geographical history" involves confronting patterns of human behavior and cognition.
- 32 Let's place beside Stein's study in white, two poems that appear in proximity to the wheel barrow and chickens of Williams's 1923 *Spring and All*: "the rose is obsolete" and "the pure products of America" (later titled "The Rose" and "To Elsie") (1991, 195; 217). Both initially appear as untitled passages within a larger work that is preoccupied by—and formally wrestling with—commodification. In the context of a strategically disordered interior in which chapter headings and numerical markers appear both in and out of sequence, "the rose" breaks from an extended prose passage in mid-sentence, a fresh cut that openly contradicts its self-proclaimed obsolescence. A few pages later the "pure products of America" spill into a genetic, cultural, and economic lineage of impoverishment that likewise counters any notion of purity.
- 33 The contradictions implicit in the "pure products of America" re-emerge forty-five years later during the summer of love, in a year of revolutions, in Oppen's great reframing of the socio-political implications of representation and arrangement, "Of Being Numerous" (177). While Stein presents a world of paratactical besidedness, Oppen's text implies an open question driven by a different preposition: what does it mean to be "of"? How does a "we" perceive what is and isn't "us" in Oppen's riff that "there is nobody here but us chickens" (172)?
- 34 Perhaps what I am saying is obvious, but what is obvious may be so large as to be almost entirely invisible and, therefore, all the more insistent on making itself known.
- 35 I'm going to continue to say something about Americans as if it were self-evident; as if we could be considered, evaluated, described as a group. As if I could unproblematically say something about "us chickens" without more fully addressing the conflicted nature of pronomial ownership and cultural identity and the war economy on the American continent. How deeply does American poetry believe in its own non-conformity? Is it not our most powerful myth? Are we not entranced by exceptionalism as much as we detest it? Ours is a tradition of refusal and negation couched in positivism. A tradition of higher and lower laws, of uneven justice and selective justification. A tradition devoted to breaking with tradition. A tradition in love with the concept of genius.
- 36 At times it seems as if our poems are running for office; that they're making claims they can never fulfill; that, like the best and worst of collective acts, they are, as Oppen put it, "as ordinary / As a president" (173).
- 37 At times we seem to write as if our lives depended on it. And this insistence is almost always a little impolite.

- 38 “I am sorry I am awfully sorry, I am so sorry, I am so sorry,” Gertrude Stein writes (1998, 377).
- 39 And what of our great reiterator? Stein repeatedly instigates a rethinking of the relation between unit and totality, containers and containment. Each of the figures in *Four in America* is composed of many “volumes,” a reversal of the usual relation between part and whole, the individual book and the life’s work, as if they could be turned inside out.
- 40 I’m especially interested in the first of her *Four in America*, devoted to a figure of great significance to Whitman, General Grant, the great depressive Union general of the American Civil War. The man whose name contained a country. U.S. Grant. Ulysses S. Grant.
- 41 Homer had a Ulysses, and Joyce had a Ulysses. But Ulysses S. Grant is Gertrude Stein’s Ulysses. A lost—even if victorious—man returning home from battle. He is her Crusoe, her Columbus : a failed sailor and a shipwreck, a survivor of his own mistakes. A person capable of making something from the wreckage of a mistake.
- 42 “Do you begin to see a little what America is what American religion is what American war is,” Stein writes in “Grant” (Stein, 1947, 32).
- 43 “When is there religion. There always is religion,” she writes (Stein, 1947, 11).
- 44 We sense in Stein’s sentences the weight and durability of words as moving parts in a larger machinery. Hers is a poetics that attends as much to function as to art—or, rather, to the function of art, the way it “works.” It is a poetics of adding on and adding up, of accumulation and of annexation. Like the vernacular architecture of the New England farmhouse. Like the Louisiana Purchase.
- 45 Stein’s subtitle for *Four in America* is “What They Sought and Bought.”
- 46 In Gertrude Stein’s lifetime, America was quite literally still being “sought and bought.” When she was born, there were not 50 states but 37. It was after she stepped onto American soil that Colorado, North and South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska and Hawaii, became states of the growing Union, long after U.S. Grant came home with blood on his boots.
- 47 It was important to Stein that she “make it” in America. In U.S. Grant’s America. It was important that she be part of the making of America, a country barely older than her grandmother.
- 48 “America is always building a nation, even now, when anybody might think a nation had been built,” she writes in her portrait of Grant (1947, 10).
- 49 When Whitman says “I” he means both a person and a people.
- 50 When Stein says “I” she might mean anybody, but when she made it in America “I” meant Alice B. Toklas, and “she” meant Gertrude Stein, a self that continues to exist *in* and as others. When “she” meant Gertrude Stein, she could celebrate herself without being impolite. “They” were over there ; the America of everybodies who sought and bought the book that propelled her into celebrity.
- 51 “Everybody, that is, everybody who writes,” she writes (1940, 2).
- 52 “Think everybody think,” she writes (1947, 41). This is a command you receive in a classroom, for instance, of geography.



- 53 This is what someone says to her companions after they've coughed out seawater on a desert shore.
- 54 Like Defoe, Stein's thinking often revolves around moments of genius, and is devoted to exploring the nature of genre and the status of fact.
- 55 *Think, everybody, think* about the importance of prepositions in Stein's work : She is *at*, *on*, and *in* Grant. The four are *in* America. The lectures are *in* America. Are four *in* America in the same way that stanzas are *in* meditation ? Or, for that matter, are they *in* meditation in the same way that Oppen's "This" is *in* "which" ?
- 56 Repetition is insistence and is a means of production, a kind of manufacturing, as of roses. For in America, for *in* America, for in *America*, refusing anything is a way of wanting everything. Being an American not in America is a way of pledging other kinds of allegiance.
- 57 Think of the attention Stein pays to pointing and to positioning—physical and social. It is impolite to point, and it is impolite not to know your place.
- 58 Now let's return to her Ulysses. The U.S. of whom Stein writes, who is Grant.
- 59 He was called Unconditional Surrender Grant. He was called Hiram Ulysses Grant until he changed his name, or someone else did. The name is powerful. It is part of an ancient story. It is a way of seizing a connection with history.
- 60 Stein : "I think I see why I am an American. Ulysses Simpson Grant" (1947, 77).
- 61 A geography may also be a portrait. A history, a life, unfolds in volumes.
- 62 A life may be all about making, the way a kitchen is all about cooking.
- 63 Writing a life is a life. A writing life is the production of something that is nothing until it is everything. It is being nobody until you are somebody.
- 64 *Four in America* was written after the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, when Stein had "made it" in America. But once she had made it, everybody wanted her to keep making the same America, to make sense in America, they wanted more autobiographies.
- 65 Was it to fulfill—and at the same time mock—the notion of literature as a product that Stein composed much of her "Geographical History of America" in smaller sections called "Autobiographies" ?
- Autobiography number one.  
I am writing all this with an American dollar pen. (1995, 183)
- 66 Stein said she wrote an autobiography the way Robinson Crusoe wrote an autobiography that was the story of Daniel Defoe. Why is Crusoe such a touchstone ? His is a story of waking up. Of self-invention. Of genius. But it is also the story of a man composed of contradictions. When his ship, a slaving vessel, is captured, he is made a slave. His first gesture when he achieves freedom is to enslave his companion. He wants human company but when evidence of the human appears, he is terrified. He teaches everything to be a mirror ; a parrot addresses him as "Poor Robin Crusoe"—which tells us something about the extent to which he wishes his own condition to be acknowledged without having to voice it himself (121). He inhabits a history of violence that appears to be about the violence done to him by the facts of the world, by the chance of his time and place, but that becomes a history of the violence he does to others, about the way acts of violence bleed into—and mirror—acts of self-definition.



- 67 George Oppen too would write *of and on* Crusoe when he was writing *Of Being Numerous*. To write as if one were alone, when one is not. As if one were shipwrecked, when in fact one is landed. Or had just returned from exile, had survived the reign of the committee on un-American activities, and so would now be unmaking this place, this poem, even as he was making it.
- 68 Perhaps it is in such unmaking that American poetry finds its return to the wildness Emerson wrote of. Not the wildness that the colonists saw as an unmarked wilderness but something closer to the crowdedness of Oppen's urban poem.
- 69 "It is entirely wild, wildest / Where there is traffic / And populace," Oppen writes (159). Crusoe is there, but the work of the poem is to reverse the terms of Crusoe's world ; to comprehend wildness not as other but as part of what "we" produce.
- 70 Stein : "You always have in your writing the resistance outside of you and inside of you, a shadow upon you, and the thing which you must express" (2002, 442).
- 71 Stein : "I liked the difference between being alone and not alone" ; "This is what makes America what it is" (1995, 233 ; 46).
- 72 It should not go without saying that the *Making of Americans* was not made *in* America, and that *Four in America* was written *out* of America, when Stein was at liberty in France. And should not the obvious be stated : that Liberty came to America—as a concept, as a word, and even as a statue—from France, in a boat ?
- 73 In "The Difference Between the Inhabitants of France and the Inhabitants of the United States of America," Stein writes : "To say we will wait, to say we wait, waiting for recognition. Take this case. Not excited about that. Take that case. No excitement in that. In that case there is no excitement in that case. That makes what one can out of everything" (1998, 517). In waiting one invents.
- 74 Considering relation, considering the trans-Atlantic movement of ideas, of humans, and of poems, Edouard Glissant writes : "Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone" (9).
- 75 "I am not sure that is not the end," writes Gertrude Stein (1995, 235).
- 76 She writes : "Let us call a boat. Let us call a boat" (2012, 42).
- 77 She writes : "Waiting means something if something is coming" (1947, 9).
- 78 We want to know what the future sounds like. We want to see its hand.
- 79 Stein : "There is singularly nothing that makes a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking" (1926, 5).
- 80 This is just the end of what is about to begin.

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## ABSTRACTS

A poet investigates an essential contradiction within American poetry's counter-tradition. How is it that vanguard works of poetry and prose repeatedly re-enact foundational narratives of Americanness ? What is the wager between being self-made and being *part of* ? How do scenes of self-determination and conquest play out generically and syntactically ? Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the trans-Atlantic movement of poetry, political theory, and property reiterates a tension between singularity and inclusion, political and linguistic representation. Works by Gertrude Stein, George Oppen, and Walt Whitman are considered in relation to the competing pressures of idiolectal invention and public address, of literary making and unmaking.

Un poète explore une contradiction essentielle, logée au cœur même de la *contre-tradition* poétique américaine : comment se fait-il que les œuvres de l'avant-garde expérimentale, en poésie comme en prose, n'ont de cesse de rejouer les grands récits fondateurs de l'américanité ? Que signifie se faire soi-même, et *faire partie* ? Comment les scènes de prise de décision et de conquête se négocient-elles génériquement et syntaxiquement ? À travers les XIX<sup>ème</sup> et XX<sup>ème</sup> siècles, le mouvement transatlantique de la poésie, de la théorie politique, de la propriété, réitère la tension entre singularité et inclusion, représentation politique et linguistique. Des œuvres de Gertrude Stein, George Oppen et Walt Whitman sont abordées en lien avec les tensions rivales de l'invention idiolectale et du discours public, de la création et de la dé-crétion littéraires.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** poetry, democracy, autobiography, Crusoe, Oppen, Whitman, Stein

**Mots-clés:** poésie, démocratie, autobiographie, Crusoé, Oppen, Whitman, Stein