

## Induction of Gertrude Stein

*On October 29, 2001, Gertrude Stein was inducted into the American Poets' Corner at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, in New York. As part of the annual ceremony, which fell on the day Eastern Standard time resumed, a chorus sang a few settings of Stein's work, among other choral works, poet Honor Moore read from Stein's work and Molly Peacock, Cathedral Poet-in-Residence, spoke about Stein, along with New York University Dean Catherine Stimpson and myself.*

Walking through the cobbled streets of Providence on Thursday night with the poet Keith Waldrop, I mentioned my great pleasure that Gertrude Stein was going to be inducted into Poets' Corner on Sunday. Keith immediately replied, "And the time is changing too."

It is indeed, and there is no time like the present time for time to change, as Stein might say, for for Stein there is no time like the present because the present is like no time at all.

And the time is changing too.

The Poets' Corner honors both poets and prose writers. And while Stein can certainly best be described as a poet, one of her remarkable achievements is to have written lustrous works in all genres of literature, plays and novels, autobiographies, librettos, essays, lectures, mysteries and valentines, portraits and landscapes, children's stories and travelogues, and, well, about half a dozen literary types for which we haven't yet come up with a name.

Stein's most immediate generational company at Poets' Corner is Eliot and Williams, Cummings and Stevens and Frost. And Stein is the first of any of the poets included here whose parents were immigrants and indeed the first whose parents did not have English as their native language.

She is also the first Jewish poet to join the poetic elect here at the cathedral.

And the time is changing too. So much to celebrate.

The newness of Stein's family history in America made America if anything more important to her, as she wrote in her epic novel *The Making of Americans*:

It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realize our parents, remember our grandparents, and know ourselves and our history is complete.

The old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old, that is the story I mean to tell, for that is what really is and what I really know.

Gertrude Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania in 1874 and lived, in the United States, mostly in Oakland and Baltimore and Cambridge. She moved to France early on and that is where she died in 1946.

Stein was not always celebrated, as she is today. Throughout much of the 20th century, her work has been derided and belittled. She challenged the prevailing notions of poetry, language, and communication in such a powerful way that even today you will find that her work stirs controversy. But maybe this is just what verse needs to be contemporary, to stay in time and not be "out of it" as Stein writes in "Composition as Explanation."

And the time is changing too, even now, exactly now, exactly now as as is as as is now as now is as and how and now and as and is and wow.

So now let's actively repeat it all, exactly as she do, she does too, she does truly, exactly as she do. As as and as is and as is now. And how.

Among all twentieth-century American poets, Stein was the most radically inventive, the one who went the deepest into the turn toward language that characterizes much of the modernist art of her time.

In her modernist compositions, Stein found an alternative to the teleological thinking that underwrites much aesthetics as well as ethics: the idea that meaning lies outside or beyond what is at hand. She found meaning inside the words of which a poem is composed, a discovery and exploration of the wordness of words that has parallels in Einstein's discovery of relativity and Freud's of the unconscious.

In Stein's work, every word has a potentially equal weight in a democracy of language. Rather than emphasize nouns or verbs, Stein created a writing in which articles and prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions, would have an equal weight and where the words and phrases are no longer subordinated to received prescriptions of grammar but shimmer in syntactic equality in poems that aver beginnings and endings for the ongoingness of middles and that elide past and future for continuous presents.

Perhaps this achievement is best described in terms of representation, for Stein created works that do not represent some thing other than what is happening as it is happening, works where the entity of writing takes on a fullness it rarely is allowed to sustain, where literary figures are grounded in actual word stuff and where the hierarchic distinction between figure and ground is collapsed into a compositional plane where words sing not so much for their supper as for our collective succor.

As Stein says in *Tender Buttons*: "Act so that there is no use in a center."

Stein, like several of her contemporaries, was a poet of everyday life, using common words to create new constructions for the new worlds we are hourly craving. Stein's aversion to symbols and allusion created a poetry richly saturated with sounds doing their business of making meaning as it made not reflecting meaning as if it were already a done deal.

In her essays she insisted that doing was much more significant than explaining or anyway that what is done is always more important than anything won.

One of the last things Stein wrote, in the year she died, was a preface to the Modern Library edition of her *Selected Writings*.

"I always wanted to be historical, from almost a baby on," Stein writes.

Well now, just in time, and the time is changing too, and Stein, always historical, all of us are always historical, is being taken out of time as we celebrate her as someone necessary for her time and our time.

And the time is changing too.

When I was 14 [Stein continues], I used to love to say to myself those awful lines of George Eliot, may I be one of those immortal something or other, and although I knew then how it went I do not know now, and then later when they used to ask me when I was going back to America, not until I am a lion, I said, I was not completely certain I was going to be but now here I am, thank you all.

And now here we all are and the time is changing too and thanks for that, thank you all, yes thanks for that, that Gertrude Stein is here, all here, here and now, and how.

And the time is changing too.

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