Science in Context **25**(3), 447–467 (2012). Copyright © Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0269889712000142

Loose Coordinations: Theater and Thinking in Gertrude Stein

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Argument

This essay offers a reading of Gertrude Stein's lecture "Plays" (1934) alongside the work of several thinkers on emotion, William James, Silvan Tomkins, and Wilfred Bion. The problem of what Stein calls "emotional syncopation" at the theater is understood in the context of James' theory of emotion. The essay proceeds to unfold Stein's emphasis on varieties of excitement by way of Silvan Tomkins' writing. It then turns to Wilfred Bion's theory of thinking to argue that the main problem with theater, for Stein, is the difficulty it poses to learning or arriving at genuinely new knowledge. The essay concludes with the suggestion that Stein's plays address the further difficulties of analyzing group dynamics or numbers of individuals, especially in the context of modernist mass media.

I begin this essay, on questions of empathy and identification in Gertrude Stein's theatrical poetics, with a scene of mixed audience response. The performance is Stein's own, her delivery of the lecture "Plays" to a specially invited New York audience of fifty at an apartment on the Upper East Side, October 30, 1934. Having just stepped off the boat from Paris the week before, Stein had not yet adjusted to her new celebrity, a consequence of the best-selling success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* the year before. Seeking practice before her first official lecture (to be given two days later to a much larger audience of 500), Stein found help in a young artist named Prentiss Taylor who arranged a dress rehearsal. Stein's performance, according to Taylor, was reasonably well received, but not spectacularly so. He wrote in a letter to his mother: "She read the lecture & it was not always easy to follow. Some of it was in her nearly vague style & always she uses simple words with fresh emphases that are difficult to catch as they go quickly by" (Rice 1996, 335). Interestingly, the difficulty that Taylor described echoes fairly precisely the main concern of "Plays" as Stein gave it to her audience early in the lecture: "The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say that it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience" (Stein [1935] 1985, 93). Taylor's lagged responses to Stein's words going "quickly by," and his difficulty in comprehension, were very much a part of the theatrical experience that she was investigating; it "is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play, because

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not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so" (ibid., 94). Stein's lecture offers a close analysis of this experience, followed by her own solution to the problem: to write a play as a landscape with which anyone can keep time.

While "Plays" was the first, it was also the least often delivered of the six lectures Stein had prepared that summer in France before going on her American tour, likely because its questions were her most pressing, present, and confusing ones. As she emerged (along with Toklas) onto the stage of modern, mass American culture, Stein wondered what it would be like for her, at the age of sixty, to come into contact with very large audiences for the first time.[1] Stein had represented these worries to herself very clearly in a short piece written in September just before leaving France, "Meditations on Being About to Visit My Native Land," in which she anticipated the behavior of her lecture audiences: "Will they ask me questions and will I ask them questions and which will ask the questions most and first, and will they listen to me and will I listen to them" (Stein 1955, 285). Taylor's description of audience reaction to the lecture shows that Stein's worries were entirely realistic: "There was considerable complicated and subtle development I couldn't begin to give you here, but most of us came away with a sympathetic approach, much more understanding. Not Mrs. Colby, she groaned I'm told & afterward was quietly scathing, but she always gauges her reactions to claim an audience for herself" (Rice 1996, 335). Once again, Taylor's response echoes Stein's lecture: in its central concern with the different emotional tempos of audience members and the action on the stage, "Plays" takes up what an older tradition of writing on the theater calls sympathy, a mechanism by which spectators may imaginatively identify with an actor's situation (Smith [1759] 2000). I would include even unsympathetic Mrs. Colby under this broader rubric of what Adam Smith called sympathy insofar as she precisely identified with Stein's situation and her efforts to "claim an audience for herself."

In the pages that follow I offer a reading of Stein's lecture that unfolds her treatment of these questions of audience identification alongside three twentieth-century thinkers on emotion, William James, Silvan Tomkins, and Wilfred Bion. I juxtapose Stein's lecture with these thinkers for conceptual reasons: I hope that Stein's close, technical investigation into the problem of theatrical identification will make more sense when read in relation to these theories of emotion. Adam Smith and the eighteenth-century context remain useful, however, in providing a larger context for linking sympathy and theatricality. Stein's lecture reinhabits and transforms a problematic most fully

[1] By the time of her lecture tour Stein had been writing for more than three decades and, while she had achieved significant recognition, was looking for a wider audience. When the Plain Edition, a small press set up with Toklas as publisher, was not the commercial success they had hoped, Stein wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. This was serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* and published by Harper Collins in the spring and summer of 1933, and its success rapidly created the audience they had been seeking, established Stein's popularity, and prompted the American tour.

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laid out, not in Smith's writing, but in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre a d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758): "The Stage is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But if the Painter neglected to flatter these passions, the Spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themelves in a light which made them despise themselves" (Rousseau [1758] 2004, 263). As David Marshall has shown, Rousseau's text, which argues at length against establishing a theater in Geneva, demonstrates the unavoidable theatricality of social relations and state power; it touches on the basic question of how one can know others in the context of such a theatricalized social and political space (Marshall 1988). Stein's lecture can be seen similarly to move from a narrower understanding of the theater as a specific institution and literary form, to broader treatments of the theatricality of social relations and accompanying epistemological problems.

Given her twentieth-century modernist sensibilities, Stein sought a less normative understanding of emotion than that implied by the theory of sympathy, as well as a less narrative approach to theater. Her plays and poetics, in avoiding earlier identificatory models, share something with Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and its techniques of alienation, distanciation, or defamiliarization. "The art of the epic theater," as Walter Benjamin put it in 1939, "consists in producing not empathy but astonishment" (Benjamin [1939] 2003, 304): as this statement makes clear, Brecht's rejection of empathy does not reject emotion per se, but seeks instead to develop roles for specific emotions (such as surprise) in a project of awakening critical attitudes in a relaxed, alert audience (Willett 1964). Stein's poetics explore the dynamics of excitement at the theater with a somewhat different goal: her plays aim to create loose emotional coordinations that permit experiences of reverie, which according to Wilfred Bion names a crucial emotional component of thinking itself. Stein's poetics, less programmatic than Brecht's, are centrally concerned with the question of whether plays can ever permit audiences (or actors) to experience new knowledge.

It may help the reader to have a roadmap for the discussion that follows. First, I should note that, in the pages that follow I do not use the term empathy except somewhat loosely as a synonym for identification. My reason for this is simple: it is not a term that Stein uses, nor do the various theorists of emotion that I address use it with consistency. Nonetheless, I believe that Stein's meditation on theater offers a detailed technical exploration of the affective components of identification or empathy in this loose sense. My reading begins with Stein's use of William James's well-known theory of emotion in an analysis of what she calls audience "nervousness." I then turn to Silvan Tomkins whose theorizing, in the Jamesian tradition, gives more precision to what Stein sees as the basic emotional problem of the theater; in particular, I use Tomkins' writing on interest-excitement to gloss the prominent place given to this affect in Stein's lecture. I then introduce object relations theory into my discussion, offering an explication of Bion's theory of thinking. My discussion concludes by briefly returning to the context of Stein's performance in America, as a way to bring forward what I believe to be an important context for Stein's poetics. I try to keep Stein's

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writing in the foreground throughout this essay because my overriding concern is to read her lecture as it poses a basic question: can theater offer the emotional conditions that permit experiences of new knowledge?

"Plays" begins by assessing the theatrical problem, the emotional syncopation between audience and stage, in psycho-physiological terms:

> Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning the play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play. (Stein [1935] 1985, 93)

Stein returns many times over the course of the lecture to the felt discrepancy between sensation (looking and listening) and emotion (feeling): "The thing seen and the emotion did not go on together" (ibid., 94). Her use of these terms is endebted to her studies in the field of experimental physiological psychology during the 1890s, first as an undergraduate at Radcliffe and Harvard with William James and Hugo Munsterberg, and then at the Anatomical Laboratory at Johns Hopkins where she almost completed a medical degree. Steven Meyer has offered the most sustained and cogent analysis of the continuities and discontinuities between Stein's early studies and her later writing practices: he suggests that Stein's writing be understood as a "poetic science" that responds to the limitations of empiricist method (Meyer 2001). A crucial aspect of this poetic science, according to Meyer, involves the forms of reflexive attention that William James invites, for example in his chapter on "The Emotions" in *Principles of Psychology* (1890):

> If the reader has never paid attention to this matter, he will be both interested and astonished to learn how many different local bodily feelings he can detect in himself as characteristic of his various emotional moods... Our whole cubic capacity is sensibly alive; and each morsel of it contributes its pulsations of feeling, dim or sharp, pleasant, painful, or dubious, to that sense of personality that every one of us unfailingly carries with him. (James [1890] 1950, 451)

Stein's use of physiological terms depends on, and can be understood in the context of, James's definition of emotion, what has come to be called the James-Lange theory "that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur *is* the emotion" (ibid., 449; emphasis in the original).

In James's theory, emotion is identified with what Meyer calls "auto-sensation" or a kind of second-order sensational experience (Meyer 2001, 23). The problem with theater, at least in Stein's initial formulation, is that it interferes with this auto-sensation or the feeling of bodily changes that "follow directly" upon perception. Attending to the action on the stage, to the development of plot and character, makes it difficult to

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experience one's emotions, that is, to feel one's own feelings in time with the action. "This that the thing seen and the thing felt about the thing seen not going on at the same tempo is what makes the being at the theatre something that makes anybody nervous" (Stein [1935] 1985, 94–5): nervousness, which Stein defines as "needing to go faster or to go slower so as to get together" (ibid., 95), becomes explicable in the context of James's theory in that the second-order auto-sensations need to catch up with the first-order perceptions for an audience successfully to feel the emotions in time with the action on the stage. According to Stein, the nervous-making elements of theater interfere even before the play begins since the curtain "already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain" (ibid.), and so does the audience, "the fact that they are or will be or will not be in the way when the curtain goes up" (ibid.). These images of Stein waiting impatiently or anxiously in her seat, craning to see past someone's head, let me characterize her theatrical experiences, both before and during the play, in terms of anticipation. Not only does Stein anticipate the performance before it begins, she also anticipates the story as the action unfolds and links the current action on the stage with what may have preceded it. Nervous excitement accompanies and motivates these back-and-forth movements, a familiar cognitive and emotional experience, I suspect, for many of us who attend narrative theater.

"And is it a mistake that that is what the theatre is or is it not" (ibid.), Stein goes on to ask in her lecture, and we may wonder with her why anticipation should be a problem and not, say, a cognitive challenge and a pleasure. Silvan Tomkins' affect theory may help to answer this question by offering a more qualitative analysis of this experience of anticipation. In particular, I turn to Tomkins' unusual understanding that excitement, the more intense form of interest, is one of a handful of innate affects in humans. Tomkins, a U.S. psychologist who studied at the University of Pennsylvania under one of James's students (Edgar A. Singer, Jr.) before working at the Harvard Psychological Clinic during the 1930s and '40s, elaborated a sophisticated, complex treatment of affect in his four-volume work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (Tomkins 1962–3, 90–91). His theorization owes as much to Darwin, James, and Freud as it does to the post-WWII context of cybernetics and systems theory. According to Tomkins, humans and other animals have evolved affect systems that are distinct from both the drives and cognition. The human affect system is differentiated into eight or nine innate affects that act as the primary motives: the negative ones such as fear-terror, distress-grief, anger-rage, among others; the positive ones, interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy; and the reorienting affect of surprise-startle. These qualitatively different affects are at once psychical and physiological, taking place primarily on the skin and musculature of the face and in the tones of the voice, and are therefore communicated both to the self and to others, or sometimes to the self as an other.[2]

[2] For an introduction to Tomkins in the context of the theoretical humanities, see Sedgwick and Frank 1995.

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Tomkins argues that the affect of interest-excitement, overlooked by Darwin and other theorists, plays a fundamental role in human experience as a support for organizing perception, learning, and creativity. In his discussion of excitement he proposes that "Any affect may have any 'object'" (ibid., 347): not only is it possible to be excited by anything, but different objects will partly transform the quality of the excitement itself as well as the person feeling the excitement. "I am, above all, what excites me" (ibid.), suggests Tomkins, one of whose primary interests was to make available to thought "the extraordinary differentiations of personality" (ibid.), a project he shared with the early Stein, as we shall see. One way that Tomkins' theory accommodates such differentiation is through its distinction between affect and emotion, between a relatively few innate affects and an infinite number of emotions. For Tomkins, emotions are made up of affects "co-assembled" with specific objects, with drives, with cognitions, or with other affects. For example, the same affect shame-humiliation is at the biological core of a variety of emotional experiences such as shyness, embarrasment, and guilt: different situations "flavor" the affect of shame to create a variety of social and moral emotions (Tomkins 1963, 119; Frank 2007). For Tomkins, intellectual curiosity and sexual lust share the affect of interest-excitement at their core, while their co-assembly with different objects, aims, and situations lead to very distinct emotional experiences.

Stein's nervous anticipation at the theater can be analyzed, in Tomkins's terms, as a complex emotion: at core the affect of interest-excitement taking the performance of the play as an object, further co-assembled with an orientation towards the future of the performance. For Stein, this orientation towards the future can become, inevitably does become, an obstacle to her excitement in, and enjoyment of, the present moment of performance itself. Anticipation of the action or plot of the play competes with her attention to what film theory calls mise-en-scene, or the dynamic relations among the actors on stage with one another and with their setting. Because of this competition (or channel overload), anticipation can lead to irritation or the activation of negative emotions such as impatience or worry which, for Tomkins, are based on the affects of anger and fear. For Stein, then, the "mistake" of live theater is a consequence of the particular emotional dyamics of an anticipatory excitement that interferes with, and reflavors the present experience of the play's performance and whatever affects or emotions she may be experiencing toward that present moment.

But this anticipatory excitement only becomes a problem in the context of the defining role that excitement otherwise plays in Stein's poetics: it is at once motive and method for her portraiture project, and is fundamental to her ways of coming to knowledge of persons. Stein began doing literary portraits towards the end of the process of writing her long novel *The Making of Americans* (composed between 1905 and 1912); as several critics have noted, the early portraits move away from that novel's exhaustive typologizing – "a history of every one who ever was or is or will be living" (Stein [1925] 1995, 180) – and towards an attempt to convey the specificity and intensity of her subjects in the mode of what William James called "knowledge of

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acquaintance" (James [1890] 1950; Steiner 1978; Meyer 2001). James used this term, along with the phrase "knowledge-about," to help map what other languages have two words for (*kennen* and *wissen*, for example, or *connaître* and *savoir*). While James roughly associated knowledge of acquaintance with feeling and knowledge-about with thought and verbal articulation, these kinds of knowledges remain complexly interimplicated, both in his writing and, even more so, in Stein's. In "Portraits and Repetition" (1934), one of the lectures she gave most often during her tour, Stein represents the goal of her portraiture this way: "I wondered is there any way of making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering. I found this very exciting. And I began to make portraits" (Stein [1935] 1985, 181). The excitement in making portraits contrasts with what she calls the "soothing" quality of novels which she associates with memory, habitual associations, familiarity of story and resemblances of character. Whereas her earlier novel writing was partly based on extensive notes, charts, and graphs that permitted Stein to distinguish character traits and arrive at kinds and categories of persons in the mode of knowledge-about, her portraits required a different kind of attention:

> I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did not by how much or how little they resembled any other one but I had to find it out by the intensity of movement that there was inside in any one of them. (Ibid., 183)

Stein's method of acquaintance, not primarily comparative or behaviorist, is essentially affective and transferential: "I must find out what is moving inside them that makes them them, and I must find out how I by the thing moving excitedly inside in me can make a portrait of them" (ibid.). Stein attends to the movement of her excitement as it indexes that of her subject. If, as Tomkins puts it, "I am, above all, what excites me," then the affective coordination of excitement can become Stein's way of acquainting herself with someone for the purposes of composing their portrait, in other words, of knowing them.

The nervous or anticipatory excitement of theater interferes with Stein's knowledge practices by threatening her efforts to coordinate excitements in a present moment. Her lecture, therefore, goes on to pursue a phenomenological analysis of excitement:

> Let us think of three kinds of things that are exciting and that make or do not make one nervous. First any scene which is a real scene something real that is happening in which one takes part as an actor in that scene. Second any book that is exciting, third the theatre at which one sees an exciting action in which one does not take part. (Ibid., 96).

Stein treats the second situation, that of reading an exciting book, briefly but revealingly for my argument here. "In the first place one can always look at the end of the book and so quiet down one's excitement. The excitement having been quieted down one

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can enjoy the excitement" (ibid., 100). Note the compatibility between Tomkins's understanding that affects may take any object, including other affects, and Stein's sense that one can, for instance, enjoy excitement. Her implicit contrast is with a form of excitement that she does not enjoy, an excitement that accompanies suspense or the anticipation of story; her reading strategy exchanges the denser excitements of anticipation for quieter, more spacious experiences of positive affect.

Stein's lecture is specifically concerned with the different ways that an exciting scene can end or "culminate": "In the real thing it is a completion of the excitement, in the theatre it is a relief from the excitement" (ibid., 96). By using the word "relief" to label the conclusion and goal of theatrical performance, Stein implicitly invokes the definition of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in particular, the difficult notion of catharsis as the purification of, and pleasurable relief from, pity and fear that tragedy is supposed to effect (Aristotle 1996, 10). The literature on catharsis is vast (as vast as mentions to it are brief in Aristotle's own remaining works), and would take me too far afield to offer even a cursory survey. However, I would like to point out that the problem of catharsis as it has been cast by modern critics addresses the value of tragedy (and, often by extension, all theater) as educative, social, or political. As Andrew Ford puts it in a useful essay, "*katharsis* belongs to a complex organization of musical and artistic activities in the state" (Ford 1995, 120), and its philosophical and aesthetic questions directly feed the political perspectives on theater that Rousseau and Brecht, among others, take up. I will touch briefly on the political implications of Stein's poetics later; for now, I would simply suggest that emotional questions of theater are always linked to specific political perspectives, and vice versa.

To return to "the fundamental difference between excitement in real life and on the stage" (Stein [1935] 1985, 97–8): what does Stein mean by contrasting relief with what she calls "completion"? Stein is not simply authenticating "real life" excitement by invidious contrast with some artificial, theatricalized kind. Her first attempt to clarify the difference seems to complicate matters by introducing the operation of memory: "As you go over the detail that leads to culmination of any scene in real life, you find that each time you cannot get completion, but you can get relief and so already your memory of any exciting scene in which you have taken part turns it into the thing seen or heard not the thing felt" (ibid., 98). Stein aligns memory with theater in that it too dislinks sensation from feeling (or auto-sensation); in both cases, a form of self-splitting observation (although perhaps not the same one) interferes with emotional participation. Stein contrasts this observational mode with the dynamics of emotional participation in a long paragraph that describes "anything exciting in which one takes part."

> There one progresses forward and back emotionally and at the supreme crisis of the scene the scene in which one takes part, in which one's hopes and loves and fears take part at the extreme crisis of this thing one is almost one with one's emotions, the action and the emotion go together, there is but just a moment of this coordination but it does exist

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> otherwise there is no completion as one has no result, no result of a scene in which one has taken part, and so instinctively when any people are living an exciting moment one with another they go on and on and on until the thing has come together the emotion the action the excitement and that is the way it is when there is any violence either of loving or hating or quarreling or losing or succeeding. But there is, there has to be the moment of it all being abreast the emotion, the excitement and the action otherwise there would be no succeeding and no failing and so no one would go on living, why yes of course not.
>
> That is life the way it is lived. (Ibid., 99–100)

Stein understands that taking part in lived, exciting scenes is violent and consequential. Such taking part involves being taken apart, that is, experiencing different, often conflicting motives ("hopes and loves and fears"). When this emotional turbulence reaches a crisis or moment of decision, the scene must have a result which, in Stein's analysis, provides a sense of completion. But this result is possible only if the scene's participants realize "a moment of coordination," in the first instance a self-coordination: "one is almost one with one's emotions, the action and the emotion go together." Note Stein's "almost" which puts off any reading of this as a moment of transcendence or unification of self or emotion. Rather, she is describing the dynamics of coming into a set of coordinated affective relations: first, a coordination of one's own motives, a difficult task precisely because of the non-singular, often contradictory nature of affect; and second, a coordination between one's motives and actions, that must itself be coordinated with the motives and actions of others or the situation itself. Completion, then, names the feeling that accompanies a set of brief momentary intra- and intersubjective coordinations that have some result or consequence.

Perhaps the clearest examples of such exciting scenes would be quarrels or arguments between lovers or family members that resolve, if they do, with some new understanding or situation. Completion, here, would name the feeling that some new state of affairs has been achieved. (Rarely, committee meetings can offer something similarly productive, although more often they end with relief that the conflictive meeting is over.) Completion can take place only when participants are persistent enough to "go on and on and on" until a moment of crisis can be reached, and Stein's paragraph conveys this persistence, itself going on until "the moment of it all being abreast." With this phrase I would like to introduce another theoretical context into my reading of Stein's lecture, the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein and her followers. In a Kleinian understanding, these turbulent dynamics of emotional coordination resemble the movements of an infant struggling to make contact with the mother's breast. This basic, frustrating experience involves violent movements back and forth as the infant struggles with perceptual and physical limits as well as conflicting motives; but if "one would go on living," as Stein puts it, then these movements must result in some moment of connection or coordination that she identifies with

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life itself. The feeling of completion in the exciting scenes that Stein describes would, in this Kleinian reading, be based on early infantile experiences of physical as well as emotional fullness: the satisfactions of a successful feeding.

Melanie Klein was part of the early wave of central European psychoanalysis, undergoing analyses with Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham before settling in London in the mid-1920s. The British-based school of object-relations which she helped to initiate differed in a number of ways from what came to be called classical psychoanalysis. For example, where Freud's main clinical methods involved verbal techniques (free association and dream interpretation), Klein developed techniques of play and play interpretation in her work with children for which the material of gesture, vocal intonation, spatial manipulation of toys, and other non-verbal communication became relevant for observation and analysis. Bringing her interpretive techniques to adult analysis, Klein developed the important understanding that infantile unconscious phantasies accompany all behavior, and that these phantasies are enacted both verbally and non-verbally in the here-and-now of experience. Object-relations theory shares something with the Jamesian tradition that I have been pursuing so far: both emphasize qualitative, phenomenological aspects of emotional or affective experience, and both attempt to theorize such experience in ways that neither oppose nor reduce affect to cognition. While Stein never met Klein (as far as I know), and was not part of the Kleinian tradition in the way that she is so clearly affiliated with the Jamesian one, nonetheless I suggest that Stein and Klein should be understood to be participating in similar modernist projects: to become acquainted with and to give verbal form to elements of experience that are difficult to access and entertain in consciousness.[3]

Stein shares with Kleinian approaches a commitment to exploring the emotional conditions for new knowledge. Wilfred Bion, arguably Klein's most significant follower, investigated these conditions intensively in his innovative theory of thinking published in the early 1960s. This work came out of Bion's efforts, like those of other Kleinians, to understand and treat disorders of thought in schizophrenic patients. In his clinical experience Bion repeatedly observed what he called "the destructive attack on a link" (Bion [1959] 2005, 93), an attack on the bond between analyst and patient that is, at the same time, an attack on the patient's own mind, specifically his or her capacity to create emotional and cognitive connections. Bion described the effectiveness of such attacks in terms of the defense that Klein called projective identification, an unconscious phantasy in which unwanted parts of the self are aggressively projected outward and located elsewhere (Klein [1946] 1997). Bion attributed the particular violence and frequency with which some patients rid themselves of bad or unwanted elements either to inborn

[3] I make this argument at greater length in a book project that is currently underway. Here I would simply point out that there are some interesting points of historical connection between the Jamesian and Kleinian traditions. William James is cited in a supporting role in one of the important early texts of Kleinian theory (Isaacs 1991, 273). Consider, too, the fact that Silvan Tomkins was analyzed by Ruth Burr, a Boston psychoanalyst trained in London in the late 1920s and early '30s.

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disposition (what Klein called envy), or to inborn disposition combined with a failure in the patient's early environment (the mother's inability or unwillingness to accept or contain the painful projected elements). Bion's understanding of such disorders in schizophrenic patients led him to think more generally about the emergence, or the failure of emergence, of an apparatus for dealing with such projected elements, in other words, an apparatus for thinking.

Bion developed this work in a book called *Learning from Experience* (1962) written in an interestingly idiosyncratic, opaque style. Bion's writing, like Stein's, is distinctly hard to summarize without extensive quotation; this is because, as Robert Hinshelwood puts it, Bion "perfected a trick of describing certain psychic processes, while at the same time engaging in just that process during the act of describing it" (Hinshelwood 1991, 235). To put this in Jamesian terms, Bion (like Stein) attempts to communicate the interimplication of knowledge of aquaintance and knowledge-about, for which an attention to the here-and-now of experience, including the experiences of writing and reading, is crucial. A reader of Bion's book expecting to walk away with an easily articulated grasp of a full-blown theory of thinking may be frustrated; at the same time, such a reader, in undergoing the experience of reading Bion's book, may have a new and more precise understanding of the role of frustration itself in thinking. "The link between intolerance of frustration and the development of thought is central to an understanding of thought and its disturbances" (Bion [1962] 1991, 28–29), suggests Bion, or as he puts it a little later, "The choice that matters to the psycho-analyst is one that lies between *procedures designed to evade frustration and those designed to modify it. That is the critical decision*" (ibid., 29; emphasis in the original).

According to Bion, an apparatus for thinking develops (or may develop) in the mother-infant dyad: the model scene is that of the infant at the breast. Briefly, the infant experiences a need for nurture, which may be physical (a need for milk) and/or psychical (a need for love). The absence of a nurturing breast is itself experienced, by the infant, as an intolerable presence, a bad breast. "Is a 'thought' the same as an absence of a thing?" (ibid., 35), asks Bion, and it seems that his answer to this question is a qualified yes. Under certain circumstances the infant can exchange the bad breast for a good one: the maternal object offers the infant not only milk but love, expressed in the form of "reverie" (ibid., 36). In the specific sense in which Bion uses it, "reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any 'objects' from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad" (ibid.). The mother contains and transforms the bad breast, thereby permitting the infant to reintroject a good breast, accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction. For this transformation to take place, the infant's frustration must be tolerated: a modification of frustration, on the part of both infant and mother, is the condition of possibility for an apparatus to emerge for thinking the thoughts of absence. The infant may eventually take in this containing apparatus, that is, it may internalize the conditions for thinking itself. Bion puts it this way towards the end of the book: "To summarize. The relationship between mother and infant described

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by Melanie Klein as projective identification is internalized to form an apparatus for regulation of a preconception with the sense data of the appropriate realization" (ibid., 91).[4]

Bion introduces the more general terms of container and contained into his theory of thinking, and casts the relation between these as necessarily reciprocal. For example, while the apparatus for thinking may be contained by the infant, it may also be projected out at a later date, say, into the analyst who then (re)plays the role of container for a patient, with the goal of permitting him or her to regain, or to develop for the first time, the capacity for thinking. Because of the constant to-and-fro movements of projective and introjective identification (as Kleinian theory understands these), the analyst and analysand may and often do reverse roles. In several later essays Bion applies these terms in other contexts: not only mother-infant and analyst-patient, but also group-individual, thinker-thought, and word-idea, each of which becomes imagined as a reversible container-contained relation (Bion [1970] 2004). One interesting consequence of Bion's theory: the activity of thinking is definitively transindividual, originating in the mother-infant dyad and characterized by the to-and-fro dynamics of identification. Reverie helps to create an analytic space for thinking that may span across the boundaries of individual bodies, and is suffused with emotional dynamics.

I would like to return to Stein's lecture with some of these ideas in mind. Consider, first, how often Stein brings up the question of knowing and how to go about it, especially in the first half of the lecture, questions that are often accompanied by a transaction between grammatical first- and second-persons, as well as a variety of third-persons (such as anybody, nobody, one). Here is a quick selection of such moments:

> This is a thing to know and knowledge as anybody can know is a thing to get by getting. And so I will try to tell you what I had to get and what perhaps I have gotten in plays and to do so I will tell you all that I have ever felt about plays or about any play. (Stein [1935] 1985, 94)

[4] My summary here is necessarily simplified, as these terms (preconception, realization) indicate. According to Bion, a thought results from what he calls the "mating" of a pre-conception – modelled on the infant's inborn diposition to expect a breast – with either a positive or negative realization, in other words, with an awareness of either the breast's presence or its absence. Bion calls the mating of a pre-conception with a positive realization a "conception," which is accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction. He calls the mating of a pre-conception with a negative realization a thought, which is accompanied by frustration. See "A Theory of Thinking" (Bion [1962] 2005).

Some of Bion's fundamental ideas have recently been synthesized and reconsidered, along with insights from a handful of other areas of study (especially attachment theory, empirical studies of infants, and neurophysiology), under the umbrella term "affect regulation." Peter Fonagy and his colleagues suggest that "A dyadic regulatory system evolves where the infant's signals of moment-to-moment changes in his state are understood and responded to by the caregiver, thereby achieving their regulation" (Fonagy et al. 2002, 37). This mother-child system for regulating affects becomes the basis for the development of what these writers call "reflective function" as well as "mentalization," the foundations for what developmental psychology currently calls Theory of Mind.

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> I ask you.
> What is knowledge. Of course knowledge is what you know and what you know is what you do know.
> What do I know about plays.
> In order to know one must always go back. (Ibid.)
> [A]s I have said knowledge is what you know and I naturally tell you what I know, as I do so very essentially believe in knowledge. (Ibid., 101)
> And in asking a question one is not answering but one is as one may say deciding about knowing. (Ibid., 102)
> I have of course always been struggling with this thing, to say what you nor I nor nobody knows, but what is really what you and I and everybody knows. (Ibid., 121)

These sentences express Stein's powerful commitment to forms of knowing that suit the dynamic, reciprocal, and transindividual relations that Bion's theory of thinking describes. Stein takes up the position of the analyst or knower, and at the same time assumes the patient's more vulnerable position of someone who seeks to discover her own mind. The audience or reader, then, is placed in the position of a (more or less patient, often frustrated) listener who may be able to piece together some interpretation, or not. Bion writes, in a discussion of knowing (what he terms "the K link," xKy) in *Learning from Experience*: "As I propose to use it it does not convey a sense of finality, that is to say, a meaning that x is in possession of a piece of knowledge called y but rather that x is in the state of getting to know y and y is in a state of getting to be known by x" (Bion [1962] 1991, 47). Bion is particularly concerned with developing this kind of knowledge when y is animate, a person or a mind: he wants a theory of knowing that does not need to render its objects lifeless, still, or static in order to know them. "The procedure I am proposing, as part of K for the purposes of knowing 'xKy' and what it represents therefore involves identification with a person that comes for analysis" (ibid., 49). Recall, the patients Bion has in mind, here, are schizophrenic; the otherwise bland-sounding procedure of "identification" should be heard in terms of the infantile, powerfully strange experiences of projective and introjective identification that characterize Kleinian theory and clinical practice, the volatile and reciprocal relations of container and contained.

For Stein, the problem with plays is that they do not bring about these fundamental, both vitalizing and destructive emotional conditions: theater does not easily offer the possibilities for reverie, for reciprocal identification and containment, for the experiences of thinking and coming to knowledge that she seeks. The reciprocity of identification is a main problem, as she explains when (after a brief digression on cinema, which I will return to) the lecture continues its phenomenological analysis of excitement. Stein poses the question of how one makes acquaintance with actors in books, in real life, and on the stage – "how are the actors introduced to the sight, hearing and consciousness of the person having the emotion about them" (Stein [1935] 1985, 105) – and after some meditation and analysis, arrives at what I think is the crux of her understanding.

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> In ordinary life one has known pretty well the people with whom one is having the exciting scene before the exciting scene takes place and one of the most exciting elements in the excitement be it love or a quarrel or a struggle is that, that having been well known that is familiarly known, they all act in acting violently act in the same way as they always did of course only the same way has become so completely different that from the standpoint of familiar acquaintance there is none there is complete familiarity but there is no proportion that has hitherto been known, and it is this which makes the scene really exciting, and it is this that leads to completion, the proportion achieves in your emotion the new proportion therefore it is completion but not relief. A new proportion cannot be a relief. (Ibid., 108)

While relief accompanies a return to some prior emotional state or equilibrium, the feeling of completion, for Stein, indexes a new emotional proportion, that is to say, a new ratio or knowledge. This knowledge can only take place when one is familiar with those involved: "generally speaking it is the contradiction between the way you know the people you know including yourself act and the way they are acting or feeling or talking that makes of any scene that is an exciting scene an exciting scene" (ibid., 106). With familiarity comes acquaintance, and with acquaintance comes the possibility of learning, that is, becoming reacquainted both with others and with one's changing self in reciprocal identification with these others. Completion, then, names the feeling of what happens when one learns from experience.

For both Bion and Stein, learning or knowing requires the to-and-fro of emotional coordination, whether in the context of theatrical performance or that of the analytic session. Both of these contexts, theater and analysis, require gradual or incremental familiarity. In Stein's understanding, the nervous excitements or anticipations of theater are too sudden, the emotional syncopations too coarse: "It is not possible in the theatre to produce familiarity which is of the essence of acquaintance because, in the first place when the actors are there they are there and they are there right away" (ibid., 109). This difficulty with acquaintance requires Stein to split her attention, as when, for example, reading a Shakespeare play "it was always necessary to keep one's finger in the list of characters for at least the whole first act" (ibid.), or to keep glancing at the program during a play's performance. Stein must have been aware that her lecture audiences would experience a similar difficulty: she could not expect them to be familiar with her work or her person except through their reading of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and its rather full cast of characters. This may explain why, at this point in the lecture, she begins a long review of her experiences of theater from childhood on. Her recollections of San Francisco theater and spectacle of the 1870s and '80s, from twenty-five cent opera and Buffalo Bill to Shakespeare and Sarah Bernhardt, would likely have charmed her American audiences, serving to introduce her to them gradually. At the same time, these recollections recontextualize her analysis of theater by giving the audience specific material to think with. For example, she describes the actor Edwin Booth in the role of Hamlet "lying at the Queen's feet during the

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play. One would suppose that a child would notice other things in the play than that but that is what I remember and I noticed him there more than I did the play he saw, although I knew that there was a play going on, the little play" (ibid., 114). Stein here recalls the Mousetrap scene, the play-within-a-play that Hamlet produces to trick Claudius into confessing his guilt through emotional response. In this scene, Hamlet's asides direct audience attention to the King's and Queen's reactions. When Stein remembers the actor's body (in the wrong place, perhaps, for Hamlet lies at Ophelia's feet), she is noticing Booth's efforts to coordinate the emotion on the stage with audience attention.

Stein's autobiographical review leads her to recall instances of drama that solved the particular theatrical problems of acquaintance and emotional syncopation, and may also have offered opportunities for varieties of reverie. For example, Sarah Bernhardt's performances, in which "[t]he manners and customs of the french theatre created a thing in itself" (ibid., 116), offered Stein "a very simple direct and moving pleasure" (ibid.); and because, in American melodrama, plot and character are less important than highly stylized gesture and affect, "there again everything happened so quietly one did not have to get acquainted" (ibid.). Stein refers specifically to a new technique developed by the actor William Gillette, "silence stillness and quick movement" (ibid.), perfected in his successful civil war melodrama *Secret Service*. In this play Gillette (who became most famous for the part of Sherlock Holmes) plays a witty, resourceful, nonchalant Northern spy under cover in the South; most of Gillette's characters were similarly dashing men, making it easy to get acquainted with any of them (Gillette [1895] 1983). We can gather from a particularly detailed set of stage directions what Stein means by Gillette's technique: "Picks up cigar with left hand. Puts revolver at right end of table with right hand, and gets a match with that hand. Stands an instant looking left. Strikes match and is about to relight cigar. Pause – eyes front. Match burning. Listening. Looks left – lights cigar – as he is lighting cigar thinks of gas being out, and steps to right, turns it on and lights it" (ibid., 162–3). Many "quick springs," "dashes," and "instantaneous turns" sharply contrast with silent motionless pauses precisely to telegraph every thought ("thinks of gas being out") and emotion to a concentrated audience's attention. This telegraphic effect is in part due to the abundance and precision of the stage directions, but it is also due to the fact that, in this scene, Gillette's character is being spied upon by other characters. Just as in *Hamlet*'s play-within-a-play, in *Secret Service* the audience's role is itself doubled or thematized on stage, actively directing and concentrating audience attention. "One was no longer bothered by the theatre," states Stein, "you had to get acquainted of course but that was quickly over and after that nothing bothered" (Stein [1935] 1985, 116–17).

In the last part of the lecture Stein finally turns to her own playwriting and explains her solution to the problem of emotional syncopation. As in melodrama and Bernhardt, Stein too subordinates narrative to other dramatic elements: "What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many" (ibid., 118–19). Her

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first experiments (written around 1913) were efforts to "make a play the essence of what happened" (ibid., 119) without actually telling what happened. These plays pose considerable challenges to a reader in that they regularly do not distinguish between various formal, conventional theatrical elements, such as dialogue, stage direction, setting, character, or even titles. Take, for example, "An Exercise in Analysis" (1917) which consists of a large number of Act and Part divisions followed by one or more sentences, and begins this way:

A PLAY

I have given up analysis.

Act II

Splendid profit.

Act III

I have paid my debt to humanity.

Act III

Hurry.

Act IV

Climb. In climbing do not be contented.

Part II

Run ahead.
Run on ahead. (Stein [1949] 1995, 119)

A reader used to longer acts that group a handful of scenes, each of which contain characters and dialogue, may initially be confused by the logic of Stein's text. But the play becomes surprisingly readable (and amusing) with the decision or realization that the Act and Part divisions can be read as names of characters. This play can be cast for four voices: Act II, Act III, Act IV, and one whose name begins as A Play and becomes Part x (where x is a roman numeral from II-LX). Differentiating the voices lets a reader begin to explore a play that has the feel of a gossip session; when four readers get together to read the play (as I have done, and have had my students do), it becomes precisely a skewed exercise in analysis of their own competitive and collaborative relations.

In the 1920s Stein began to model her playwriting on the experience of landscape:

> I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there. (Stein [1935] 1985, 122)

If melodrama solves the problem of emotional syncopation by tightly constraining audience attention to the emotion on the stage through highly artificial or stylized techniques, Stein's landscape drama tends oppositely to unconstrain audience attention and aim for much looser emotional coordinations:

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> the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. (Ibid., 125)

Deemphasizing plot and the closure of narrative, Stein's plays open up the relational space of the stage itself by focusing on other theatrical elements, including linguistic play, bodily movement or gesture, sound, sets, lighting, costume, all of which come to have equivalent value. For example, Stein's late retelling of the Faust myth in "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights" (1938) includes a ballet that begins this way:

> Doctor Faustus sitting alone surrounded by electric lights.
> His dog comes in and says
> Thank you.
> One of the electric lights goes out again the dog says
> Thank you.
> The electric light that went out is replaced by a glow.
> The dog murmurs.
> My my what a sky.
> And then he says
> Thank you. (Stein [1949] 1995, 91)

The theater director Robert Wilson staged this play in the 1990s with an acrobatic troupe and a light show illuminating the audience as often as the actors on the stage. Its effect was to recreate the theatrical space in such a way that it could permit what Stein calls "a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep time" (Stein [1935] 1985, 131). Rather than insisting on one-way audience identification with the actors on the stage, Stein's plays generally aim for experiences of reverie and reversibility; they let audiences and actors take part in, both to contain and to be contained by, a set of loosely coordinated relations among multiple theatrical elements, including the audience members themselves.

This general idea of a coordination of relations among a number of individuals shows up in the last section of Stein's lecture, in the context of a seemingly simple observation about the difference between what motivates her portraits and her plays.

> I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits.
>
> I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play. (Ibid., 119)

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If portraiture is a genre for knowing individuals, then plays, as Stein understands the genre, are representations of a number of individuals in relation. This description matches some of the changes that took place during a key transition between what is usually called the first and second phase of Stein's writing, a change from the repetitious prose style of *The Making of Americans* to the lucidly opaque poetic style of *Tender Buttons*. Stein wrote her first play, "What Happened. A Play in Five Acts," in 1913, not long after completing *A Long Gay Book* and *Many Many Women*, works which attempt depictions of small numbers of persons, mostly couples and triples. She took up the project of investigating aggregates of individuals in the plays that she began writing in the 19-teens: her plays can generally be read as they stage relations of dynamic knowing among a number of people. The specific question they pose is, how can one know these aggregate relations of knowing? How can one possibly know, and depict or represent, the complexity of group relations?

For the purposes of my essay, it is of more than passing interest that Wilfred Bion, before pursuing his theory of thinking, had primarily investigated group psychology. In fact, he coined the term "group therapy" in the first of a sequence of articles on the subject published between 1943 and 1952, collected in *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (1961), by which term he meant, not primarily the therapy of the individual in the group, but the therapy of the group as such, or the attempt "to make the study of their tensions a group task" (Bion 1961, 29). Bion's basic methodological question is similar to Stein's: how can one know and experience aggregates of individuals using analytic, transferential methods, based as they are on an exchange between two people? How can one "empathize" with groups for the purposes of studying them? In Bion's Kleinian understanding, experiences in groups pose particularly fraught emotional difficulties that he summarizes this way: "The adult must establish contact with the emotional life of the group in which he lives; this task would appear to be as formidable to the adult as the relationship to the breast appears to be to the infant" (ibid., 141–2). In his later writing Bion recasts his thinking on groups in the more general terms of container and contained that I have described above.

By way of concluding, then, I would simply restate the problem of the theater, as Stein's lecture understands it, this way: it is the problem of thinking, knowing, and making emotional contact with groups. Indeed, the particular challenges of Stein's plays emerge from her epistemic ambitions for them: plays, for Stein, offer a literary form for representing a group's dynamics to itself. As such, they prompt questions about the analytic procedure of identification, and in particular, about the technical – that is to say, emotional and sensational – nature of identification and empathy. These questions are difficult enough to answer when the object of knowledge is one individual (such as a patient who comes for analysis, or a friend who sits for a portrait), but they become much more complex when what is being investigated are groups or numbers of persons. And the situation becomes even more complex in the environment of technologies that, as Stein points out in the middle of her lecture, shape the modernist/mass cultural moment. Indeed, the lecture's technical questions are not only her own:

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> I may say that as a matter of fact the thing which has induced a person like myself to constantly think about the theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action is the same as you may say general form of conception as the inevitable experiments made by the cinema although the method of doing so has naturally nothing to do with the other... The fact remains that there is the same impulse to solve the problem of time in relation to emotion and the relation of the scene to the emotion of the audience in the one case as in the other. (Stein [1935] 1985, 104)

The same day she arrived in the U.S. Stein was filmed in a newsreel, which was released to cinemas across North America; a week after "Plays" was first given, she was interviewed live on NBC radio coast-to-coast. Not only was Stein encountering the media machines that were to create the fame she was seeking, she was also encountering, at first hand, those powerful sociopolitical institutions which had cornered the market on precisely the same task she thought plays were best suited for: to represent a group's dynamics to itself.

Finally, by way of assessing the remarkable influence of Stein's landscape poetics: arguably no other modernist writer in the literary canon (in English) has exercised as strong a gravitational pull on the performance avant-garde, beginning with John Cage and other New York artists of the 1940s and '50s and extending into the present moment (see Robinson 1994). Indeed, as the editors of the collection *Land/Scape/Theater* (2002) put it, "Landscape names the modern theater's new spatial paradigm" (Fuchs and Chaudhuri 2002, 2). I suggest that Stein's poetics have made their mark because of how they address fundamental questions of identification in the context of the displacement and integration of theater, and theatrical technique, into mass media forms (cinema, radio, and television). If play-going could serve earlier writers as a general figure for relations of social spectatorship and affective exchange within the state, for Stein and other twentieth-century writers, the figure of the theater becomes inflected by the techniques and technologies that reproduce, and distribute to great numbers, the face and the voice. How can one think, know, and make contact with groups in the environment of such technologies? This is the contemporary version of the problem of the theater, as Stein's lecture permits it to be reposed.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the organizers of the workshop "Varieties of Empathy in Science, Art and Culture" (held at the University of British Columbia) as well as the international symposium "Contemporaneities of Gertrude Stein" (held at the Université du Québec à Montréal) at which I presented earlier versions of this essay. I am also grateful to two anonymous readers at *Science in Context* for their helpful comments.

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