The Transverberation of Their Heart: Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas, and the Making of Lesbian Hagiography

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How can a language alter. It does not it is an altar.¹

In Paris France, a 1940 novella, Gertrude Stein writes about the death of her dog Basket and the addition of a new dog of the same breed to her family:

So we tried to have the same and not the same and there was a very large white poodle offered to us who looked like a young calf with black spots and other very unpleasant puppies with little pink eyes and then at last we found another Basket, and we got him and we called him Basket and he is very gay and I cannot say that the confusion between the old and the new has yet taken place but certainly le roi est mort vive le roi, is a normal attitude of mind.²

Michael Trask, in his 2003 book Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought, points out that “the idea that one can transfer one’s cathexis from one object to another without any loss of feeling finds its basis for Stein in the model of sovereignty – the kings two bodies – that grounds the reproduction of political orders and political loyalty.”³ This transfer of cathexis signals a difference without difference, as well as a mimetic structure of affection. That the dog Basket appears and behaves in precisely the same way as his predecessor, and indeed is given the same name though he is clearly and identifiably a different animal suggests the illusion of continuity and a kind of immortality that conceals the radical break of the loss of an object and its subsequent replacement – a difference without difference, “the same and not the same.” The structure of affect, similarly, is mimetic inasmuch as the love felt for Basket II is merely a continuation/reiteration of the love felt for Basket I.

In this chapter, I argue that mimesis – a difference without difference – provides Stein with a basis for thinking about and writing about her relationship with Alice Toklas. Throughout

¹ Gertrude Stein, Useful Knowledge (New York: Payson & Clarke, ltd, 1928) 108.
² Gertrude Stein, Paris France (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1940), 70.
her career, Stein transfers her own cathexis from Toklas to various characters in her plays, novels, and shorter writings. This transfer, however, is always already inexact; language can never fully capture the totality of felt emotion. Emotion, in this case love, always exceeds language’s ability to express it. In this way the phrase “difference without difference” cuts two ways – the first alludes to the model of continued sovereignty that Stein lays out with respect to Basket, the second indicates the relationship that Stein’s representations of Toklas and their love for one another have to the things themselves. While the representations of Toklas, the most prominent and obvious being that of the character “Alice B. Toklas” in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, are as exact and accurate as Stein chose to make them, the structure of language prevents a perfect representation. Often the object exceeds its representation, but this is not uniformly the case, as occasionally the representation exceeds the object. I argue that the negotiation of these excesses is fundamental to Stein’s project of expressing her relationship with Toklas through her work, and that the model Stein ultimately employs to work through these excesses is not one of sovereignty, but of religion.

Aspects of Teresa de Lauretis’s 1994 book The Practice of Love buttress this argument, and need to be foregrounded as an introduction to the chapter as a whole. Of particular interest is de Lauretis’s claim that “it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian.” This claim is grounded in a study of a film in which two women share a common fantasy of lesbian origin – it is by means of this fantasy that the women are able to recognize their own origins as both subjects and objects, and because this is a shared fantasy, it requires both women to construct lesbian identity. De Lauretis takes this claim a step further later in her argument by suggesting that the figure of the lesbian “represents the possibility of female subject and desire: she can

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seduce and be seduced, but without losing her status as subject. That is to say ... she is both – even at once – desiring subject and desiring object; and given the existence of other lesbians, her desire is – in principle – satisfiable.”⁵ In this sense, the lesbian is essentially double, and within lesbian subjectivity lies precisely the kind of difference without difference Stein illustrates in her work. Fantasy is mimetic, and in de Lauretis’s formulation, lesbian fantasy is doubly so, since it requires two women interpreting, decoding, and ultimately sharing a fantasy:

In the vicissitudes of the component instincts, with their oscillation between and co-presence of opposites, the subject is caught up in a doubling and a splitting, a reversible pattern of specularization and differentiation that presupposes at least two terms of the fantasy, the two bodies, and in the present instance, two female bodies that are not simply the same but at once similar and different.⁶

Stein illustrates this doubling and splitting throughout her work, most notably in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas with its famous final paragraph in which Stein reveals herself to be the author of the text purportedly written by her lover. Not only, in this instance, is the figure of Alice B. Toklas split, but the figure of Stein-as-author is notably split as well inasmuch as the Autobiography represents an anomalous break in style from Stein’s earlier prose. The reader can never arrive with complete certainty at the identity of the author of the text, and consequently can never arrive at the difference between the two figures. While this remains the most famous instance of Stein’s doubling, I argue in this chapter that it recurs throughout her work, in both major and minor pieces, and does so most decisively in a religious context. The explicitly religious themes of Stein’s earlier works metamorphose and expand into more capacious understandings of religiosity over time, but this doubling, this difference without difference, is the hallmark in Stein’s writing of the relationship between herself and Toklas. It

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⁵ Ibid. 156, emphasis in original.
⁶ Ibid. 96, emphasis in original.
signals the signification and representation of the love and desire of the two women, and in this sense, following de Lauretis, can be called a fetish:

What the lesbian desires in a woman is indeed not a penis but a part or perhaps the whole of the female body, or something metonymically related to it. She knows full well she is not a man, she does not have the paternal phallus (nor would her lover want it), but that does not preclude the signification of her desire: the fetish is at once what signifies her desire and what her lover desires in her. In short, then, the lesbian fetish is any object, any sign whatsoever, that marks the difference and the desire between the lovers.\footnote{Ibid. 228.}

In this chapter I argue that the work of Gertrude Stein is precisely this sign that marks the difference – a difference without difference – between Stein and Toklas. It signifies Stein’s desire for Toklas, readily seen in the transfer of cathexis to characters within the texts, as well as Toklas’s desire for Stein evidenced not only in the *Autobiography* and Toklas’s actual autobiography *What Is Remembered*, but also in the reciprocal relationships of affect that circulate among textual characters standing in for Stein, for Toklas, and for both simultaneously. I argue that this work is ultimately hagiographical – that Stein’s early experiments with direct engagement with religious themes and figures matures into a hagiographical eye cast on historical figures from Ulysses S. Grant to Susan B. Anthony and ultimately to Alice Toklas. In this chapter, therefore, I trace Gertrude Stein’s gradual composition of the life of Saint Alice.

*Useful Knowledge*, a collection of several of Stein’s short writings published in 1928, announces itself as a work about America. In the prefatory “Advertisement,” Stein explains the impetus for the project:

> Writing about Americans comes to be very much what is natural to any one thinking that it is pleasant to be one. America is interesting because they will come to like a pleasant thing as they have come to be one. And every little helps. … Useful Knowledge is pleasant and therefore it is very much to be enjoyed. When there are many Americans and there are there is a great deal of pleasure in
knowing that not only do they differ from one another but that Iowa and California are very pleasant and very different from one another.\(^8\)

But while the “Advertisement” purports to be about difference and differences, and the titles of many of the pieces support the claim, the text of *Useful Knowledge* turns this claim on its head. For example, in *Wherein Iowa Differs from Kansas and Indiana*, Stein writes “Iowa means much. Much much much. For so much. Iowa means much. Indiana means more. More more more. Indiana means more. As more. Kansas means most and most and most and most. Kansas means most merely.”\(^9\) While it is true that Stein’s descriptions of the states differ from one another, it is unclear precisely how they differ. In what way does Indiana mean more? Instead of an enumerated list of differences, Stein provides comparatives and superlatives that define a relative but arbitrary relationship between the three states. Stein makes similar moves in several of the other pieces, notably *Wherein the South Differs from the North*, *The Difference Between the Inhabitants of France and the Inhabitants of the United States*, and, importantly, *Lend a Hand or Four Religions*. Among the effects of this confounding of announced expectations is the sense of a difference without difference. While Iowa and Indiana and Kansas differ from one another as states, as words, and as concepts, placing them in such an arbitrary relationship to one another emphasizes their use in the context of Stein’s larger projects. Indeed, anything could “mean much” as Iowa means much, and anything else could “mean more” as Indiana means more. In this way there is no difference between Iowa, Indiana, and Kansas.

Stein does not collapse the meanings entirely, however. Early in the piece she encourages herself, anticipating the expectations of her readers, to “Have examples. Add Examples. Added examples. Every one has heard it said.”\(^10\) She makes a similar move in *The Difference Between*

\(^8\) Stein, *Useful Knowledge* frontispiece.  
\(^9\) Ibid. 38.  
\(^10\) Ibid. 38.
the Inhabitants of France and the Inhabitants of the United States: “Five examples of each will be given. Five examples of each will be given so that the difference will be as well understood as ever.”11 These examples amount to very little in both cases if they are treated as literal examples. But Stein’s insistence not only on the existence of examples differentiating the objects of her study but also her foregrounding of the writing process and its attendant expectations of audience points to repetition and near-repetition as a marker of movement, change, and difference. These works illustrate a delicate tension between meaning and syntax – the meanings of the phrases do not differ from one another very much, if indeed they do at all. But the syntactic arrangement of the phrasing propels the text forward and backward, constantly shifting its signifiers to shade the common signifieds with difference.

In Lend a Hand or Four Religions, Stein continues to explore this difference without difference, and ties it specifically to thinking about religion, spirituality, and femininity that will have ramifications throughout her career. The play consists of four speakers, the “religions,” who attempt to describe the spiritual experience of an unnamed woman (known only as “the chinese Christian”) to whom they are witness. The text itself is presented in a two-column format similar to that employed for the libretto of Four Saints in Three Acts, and indeed there are occasional traces of that nearly contemporaneous text, particularly in a sort of roll call (and the fact that it occurs fully twelve pages into the text):

| First religion               | First religion here. |
| Second religion              | Second religion here.|
| Third religion               | Third religion here. |
| Fourth religion              | Fourth religion here.|

The action of the text is limited – the woman is variously described by the religions as kneeling, mending, preparing, and seeing. In this play, Stein furthers her project of drama as landscape,

11 Ibid. 43.
12 Ibid. 182.
using natural imagery to bolster the scene of quiet religious contemplation: “This is their hope and there are leaves to cover and caress. So there are.”

Linda Watts, in her essay “Can Women Have Wishes,” argues that the play is ultimately a narrative of a transformational spiritual journey that is distinctly feminine and specifically set apart from traditional organized religions. Watts focuses her attention on the lack of the woman’s perspective (she never speaks – only the religions report action), and the fact that the four religions, she claims, are indistinguishable from one another:

> Although the reader might expect the four religions to represent four distinct spiritual voices, their statements prove extremely similar. Beyond minor peculiarities of syntax, the four religions share a single point of view. … By uniting the four religions through a common perspective, Stein suggests how little difference there is among institutional religions. Except for the names the religions give themselves, they speak as one.

Among the examples Watts gives is a short passage from just after the roll call:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First religion</th>
<th>Very well.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second religion</td>
<td>Very very well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third religion</td>
<td>Very well very well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth religion</td>
<td>Very well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That Stein suggests that there is little difference, ultimately, between institutional religions seems a reasonable enough reading. However, to further suggest that these religions “share a single point of view” and “speak as one” does damage to the text and to the spirit of Stein’s famous use of repetition to indicate, among other things, shades of minor but significant difference. It is never the case in the text of the play that one speaker says something in precisely the same way as the preceding speaker. While the meanings of “very well” and “very very well” may at first

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13 Ibid. 182.
blush be so similar as to collapse into one another, their locutions differ immensely. Stein perhaps best illustrates this by a longer passage at the very start of the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First religion</td>
<td>Advances and then sees someone she advances and then she sees someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second religion</td>
<td>They advance and they see someone, they advance and they see someone as they advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third religion</td>
<td>She advances and she sees someone, she sees someone or she advances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth religion</td>
<td>As she advances she sees someone. Some one is seen by her as she advances.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only do the four religions differ from one another in their accounts of what they are all, presumably, witnessing together, Stein includes inconsistencies even within the speakers’ lines themselves. While it seems clear that two things occur in this exchange – seeing and advancing – the speakers disagree not only on the number of people observed, but also the manner and order of the actions. The first religion insists on a linearity of temporality – “she advances and then she sees someone.” The second religion disagrees not only as to the number of persons involved but also the temporality of the actions – “they see someone as they advance.” The third religion is perhaps the most unusual, unsure of which action has taken place, only that one of them has – “she sees someone or she advances.” Finally, the fourth religion employs the passive to indicate a distinct shift of emphasis away from the female figure and toward the anonymous object of the gaze – “someone is seen by her as she advances.” Stein offers in this passage a hint of how to read the work itself – as difference without difference. In this way, she continues her project of experimental theatre by foregrounding the interpretation of her own work. While the action of the play is visible and inviolate, the interpretations of the action can differ even at the level of factual analysis. There is no difference between what the first religion sees and what the second religion sees, but there is a marked difference between

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16 Ibid. 170. I suspect that the first line should be formatted in two columns designating “First religion” as the speaker of the line. I have, however, decided to transcribe the text exactly as it appears in the 1928 edition.
how they see it and how they relate what they have seen to the audience. While Watts’s argument about a distinctly feminine spirituality arising in the text is valid, the four religions can certainly be read in a more generous manner. It is simply not the case that they are indistinguishable from one another: “I feel that the difference is this. There the colour is of a splendour and rich and full and delicate and here it is high and strong and rich and delicate.”

The religions continually focus on shades of difference that Watts argues are identical. On closer examination, however, these moments illustrate Stein’s faculties for difference in repetition – adding texture to the feminine spirituality that lies at the heart of the play.

Not all of Stein’s work focusing on religion concerns femininity, however. The central conceit of *Four In America*, a text published posthumously in 1947 but written immediately following *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in late 1933 and early 1934, is to imagine four prominent historical Americans and write portraits of them based on what they would have been had they been something other than what they were. Thus Wilbur Wright is imagined as a painter, Henry James as a general, George Washington as a novelist, and, in the piece that opens the text, Ulysses Grant as a religious leader. The title of the work is thus doubly apt – *Four In America* is homophonous with Foreign America – and Stein’s goal is clearly a making strange, not only of history but also of naming, authorship, and the sense of what it means to be an American. The text was Stein’s first major work after the publication and runaway success of the *Autobiography*, and, in an interview published the *New York Times* on May 6, 1934, “she promises that the new book will not be difficult to read, which seems to mean that the style she has chosen is less in the manner of ‘Capitols Capitols’ [sic] and more on the order of the

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17 Ibid. 183.
When she sent the Grant section to prospective publishers, however, they declined it on the grounds that it was too like her older, more “difficult” work, too unlike the text that had made her a sensation.

While the style of *Four In America* is not as straightforward as that of the *Autobiography*, the themes, especially in the Grant section, most certainly are. Stein uses both texts to voice her ideas about the ways in which an author can influence reality and history, and how the writing of history can directly affect the sense of that history. Similarly, both examine public lives and the sense of what lies behind them. Both texts are also deeply concerned with names – “Grant” opens with an extended passage detailing not only Grant’s change of name from Hiram Ulysses Grant to Ulysses Simpson Grant – and also the importance of names in the construction of personhood: “names have a way of being attached to those that bear them.” Stein supposes that had Grant not changed his name he would have been a leader in religion and, ultimately, a saint. Naming, it seems, carries nearly all of the weight of determining one’s identity: “When you are born as well as where and how perhaps does make a difference and perhaps not. It does make a difference that everybody born at any time under any condition is named a name, they have the career and character of that name.”

What makes the Grant section particularly compelling is the fact that his name was changed after he was born. Stein writes:

> After he was born his name was changed. This really does not and should not make any difference. Because after all he had been born and he had been named. But it did make a difference. Yes I think so. Because after all what was his name.

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18 http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/03/specials/stein-views.html?_r=5&scp=1&sq=gertrude%2520stein%2520lansing%2520warren&st=cse (Placeholder footnote – will be fixed in future drafting)


20 Ibid. 4.
And since, as we now know, it does make a difference, of course it did make a difference.\textsuperscript{21}

With this, Stein effectively splits the narrative – she must now focus on two separate Grants, Hiram Ulysses and Ulysses Simpson, and the differences between them. One is a general, the other a religious leader, both are and are not the same person. Here Stein continues to emphasize the difference without difference of \textit{Useful Knowledge} and other works, tying it more directly to issues of naming and religion: “Names and religion are always connected just like that. Nobody interferes between names and religion.”\textsuperscript{22} But this religion is quite unlike the feminine spirituality described by the four religions in \textit{Lend a Hand} – Grant’s religion is a distinctly American religion. Stein repeatedly emphasizes the American qualities of her text, from a minor “Oh say can you see what I say” to extended descriptions of the differences between American religion and European religion.\textsuperscript{23} American religion, for Stein, is exemplified by the camp meeting, conjuring images not only of the frontier but also of community. These communities, though, are curious inasmuch as they bring together a group of people who would not otherwise have access to dedicated houses of worship. There is a continual motion implied by the camp meeting – a motion outward and westward – that focuses on the practical and the demands of the environment: “European religion is forward and back standing still…. There is no forward and back and staying quiet no standing still in American religion. It is like there being no sky it is there, as they know, there is no sky not that they ever think about the sky not even when they are killed and do not die, not they.”\textsuperscript{24} While American religion differs from European religion in that there is no sky, it seems to be similar in at least one respect – the resurrection of the dead.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 6-7.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 7.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 24.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 53.
While Stein focuses much of her attention in “Grant” on religion, she is careful not to neglect her primary subject(s): Grant himself. Over the course of the section, interspersed among the definitions of American religion, Stein presents two parallel biographies, one of Ulysses Simpson Grant and one of Hiram Ulysses Grant. In this way, Stein tries her hand at an imagined hagiography – an American hagiography – but is careful not to stray too far from the actual historical personage she has taken as her subject. Each character contains traces of the other, and Stein eventually reveals why this is so: “It is funny that long ago soldiers were members of religion and members of religion were soldiers just like that.”

Though Stein marks this revelation as odd, her foregrounding of the fact suggests that, indeed, she has performed a similar maneuver herself, splitting, doubling, and reconciling the figure of Grant. Grant, the soldier, both is and is not Grant, the leader in religion. Writing a hagiography of a figure that both is and is not a real historical personage offers opportunities for Stein to continue to consider the role religion plays in her writing, and, as “Grant” shows, it allows for an expansion of what hagiography itself can mean.

In *Useful Knowledge*, Stein repeatedly emphasizes the difference without difference that manifests by means of the varieties and repetitions of her diction throughout the texts. In *Lend a Hand*, Stein ties this difference without difference to religion, suggesting that the ultimate meanings of religions have much in common while they differ distinctly in their process of arrival at those meanings. Also, following Watts’s argument, the spirituality that emerges in *Lend a Hand* from between the shades of differences in the dialogue of the four religions is a feminine spirituality. In the Grant section of *Four In America*, Stein reimagines the life of Ulysses S. Grant as though he were a religious leader, and in the process writes her own kind of hagiography. This hagiography reflects Stein’s immense patriotism, and insists on the primacy of

25 Ibid. 62.
the American frontier in determining the quality of an imagined American saint. It is in the combination of these two ideas, a feminine spirituality and an American hagiography, that Stein is able to fully articulate her relationship with Alice Toklas over the course of several literary texts. *Four Saints in Three Acts* is a preliminary attempt at a hagiography of multiple saints, but it focuses primarily on Saint Teresa of Ávila. While the text clearly links Teresa and Toklas, the slippage of representation is such that all of the saints seem to collapse into one another – each being necessary to fully articulate all perspectives on Stein and Toklas’s relationship. Stein represents this relationship neither as feminine nor masculine, but as a simultaneous combination and renunciation of both – it is a mystical marriage. *The Mother of Us All*, Stein’s last major work, is a fuller and more mature expression of an idea first conceived of during the composition of *Four Saints* – the American hagiography. The opera, about the life and work of Susan B. Anthony, joins religion and religious feeling much more strongly with the feminine, and more fully explores the gender relations of marriage – both traditional marriage and the lesbian marriage of Stein and Toklas. Finally, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein adopts a style that belies the complexities of her project: a representation of her lesbian relationship based on mimesis – a difference without difference – that shatters conventions of identity and authorship and creates a sainted life of Toklas. These works mark the difference between the two lovers, Stein and Toklas – in them Stein finds a model of eroticism in religion and religious typology that looks very much like the eroticism she shares with Toklas, and in them Stein is able to write the lives and experiences of her own patron, Saint Alice.

**Prepare for saints: *Four Saints in Three Acts***

The genesis of Stein’s collaboration with Virgil Thomson on the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* is familiar if not particularly well-documented. After Thomson had been admitted
into Stein’s inner circle at 27 Rue de Fleurus, thanks in no small part to the delight Toklas took in his setting of Stein’s Susie Asado to music, he was eventually able to convince Stein to collaborate more closely. Thomson later, in his autobiography, claimed credit of the theme: “it was the artist’s working life, which is to say, the life we were both living.” How closely the libretto follows this theme is a matter for debate, though it seems clear, at least in the first section of Stein’s text, that she struggled considerably with precisely how to begin, certainly a marker of the artist’s working life. For the subject of the opera, Stein expressed interest in American history, specifically the figure of George Washington, but Thomson vetoed the idea on costuming grounds. Eventually, according to Thomson, they “gave up history and chose saints, sharing a certain reserve toward medieval ones and Italian ones on the grounds that both had been overdone in the last century. Eventually our saints turned out to be Baroque and Spanish.”

Steven Watson, in his excellent account of the writing, production, and performance of the opera, suggests that Stein “believed that the purity of the artist’s devotion to art reflected the immaculate conditions of the religious life, that genius was analogous to sainthood, and that artists and writers expressed contemporary spirituality before it appeared in the society at large.” Though Watson’s book is well-researched and compellingly detailed, he does not give any solid evidence for this rather bold claim about Stein’s beliefs. While this explanation fits nicely with Thomson’s recollection about the theme of the opera, and is perhaps based on a passage in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas in which Stein and Thomson discuss the relationship of sainthood to hysteria, a stronger and more textually-based argument points toward the saints, particularly Saint Teresa of Ávila, as representations of Toklas and the “landscape” of

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27 Ibid. 91.
the opera as an attempt to capture the breadth of Stein and Toklas’s relationship. Ulla Dydo points out that Stein “had from early years often called Toklas Therese, an association powerful long beyond her interest in personality types. Once Therese was not only a name for a lover but an actual person, she gained an enlargement of scope in the new work about the saint.”

Similarly, in the Autobiography, Stein writes that “she has three favourite saints, Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint Theresa of Avila and Saint Francis.” While this may be a revision of history given that the Autobiography was written after Four Saints, the explanation fits nicely with Dydo’s claim and with the description later in the Autobiography of the couple’s arrival in Ávila:

I [Toklas] immediately lost my heart to Avila, I must stay in Avila forever I insisted. Gertrude Stein was very upset, Avila was alright but, she insisted, she needed Paris. We were both very violent about it. We did however stay there for ten days and as Saint Theresa was a heroine of Gertrude Stein’s youth we thoroughly enjoyed it.

While Stein’s libretto may well have begun to explore the theme of the working artist’s life, it metamorphosed into a profound meditation on her own relationship with Toklas – the character Therese was given new life in the form of the spirit of Toklas.

It is not the case, however, that any figure could have been chosen to stand in for Toklas. The text balances its subjects, Toklas and Teresa (“with St. Ignatius in the distance,” Stein wrote in a letter, though as this chapter will show, not quite so far in the distance as some critics would have it) with care, and while the text may ultimately be “about” Toklas, Teresa animates Toklas as much as Toklas animates Therese. Richard Bridgman, in his landmark monograph Gertrude Stein in Pieces, finds himself frustrated by the opera. Though he concedes that Stein’s claim of

29 When referring to the historical personage, I will be using the Spanish spelling: Teresa. Stein, in her libretto, uses the English: Therese. I will use Stein’s spelling when referring to her character.
32 Ibid. 778.
affinity to the saints in the *Autobiography* is certainly credible, he remarks that the opera shows a marked “uncertainty of purpose,” and, “Gertrude Stein’s powers of invention being weak, four saints do not play central roles.”

Perhaps most damning for Bridgman is Stein’s attempt to write an opera about a historical figure, since Stein’s previous efforts had been personal, domestic: “for all her fondness for Theresa, Gertrude Stein lacked information about her. … Writing about a historical figure without doing research was causing her difficulties; the signs of her ignorance were manifold.”

Dydo is much more generous, speculating that Stein “may have heard William James in lectures speak of saintliness, meditative concentration, and perhaps of St. Theresa’s amatory flirtations.” Speculation seems unnecessary, however, since Stein herself admitted her familiarity with Teresa’s works and writings. In a 1934 New York *Times* interview, she said that she had “read the meditations of St. Therese whose mysticism was ‘real and practical.’”

Similarly, Dydo points out that “among the books from the Stein library preserved at Yale is a French translation of St. Ignatius’ autobiographical *Testament*.” In crafting her characters, then, Stein had knowledge of the historical saints’ own autobiographies to aid her, as well as the emotional investment she had in the figure of Teresa from her childhood, augmented by her emotional attachment to Toklas.

In order to better appreciate some of the images Stein uses in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, it is necessary to look at some of those same writings of the saints with which Stein was familiar. In particular, Teresa’s autobiography and *Interior Castle*, along with the autobiography and *Spiritual Diary* of Ignatius, provide valuable insight into alternative expressions of desire,

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34 Ibid. 180.
36 “MISS STEIN USES SAINTS AS SCENERY: They 'Exist and Converse, but Don't Do Anything,' She Says in Explaining Her Opera,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1934.
sexuality, and identity that Stein examines in her opera. Many themes recur throughout both saints’ writings which provided Stein with methods of thinking about religion and spirituality in ways she found analogous to her own ideas about gender, sexuality, and her relationship with Toklas. Of particular interest in both autobiographies is the importance of mimesis for the saints’ conceptions of themselves as potentially holy individuals. In Ignatius’s *Reminiscences* he writes that he loved reading tales of chivalry, but while he was recuperating from his war injury “none of those books which he normally read could be found, and so they gave him a life of Christ and a book of the lives of the saints in Spanish.”

Reading these gave Ignatius great pleasure, and after a vision of the Virgin, he resolved “to do great penances, with an eye at this point not so much to making satisfaction for his sins as to pleasing and being agreeable to God. And so, when he would make up his mind to do some penance that the saints did, *his aim was to do the same*, and more besides.” Ignatius begins to model his spiritual life after the lives of the saints about whom he read, an entry into spirituality and holiness based on mimetic action.

Similarly, Teresa writes in her autobiography about several occasions where formative moments of profound spirituality are based on a mimetic substitution. Recalling her mother’s death when she was thirteen, Teresa writes: “When I began to realize what I had lost, I went in my distress to an image of Our Lady and with many tears besought her to be a mother to me.”

Teresa’s spiritual life is frequently bound up in images and texts – meditating on the image or the text allows Teresa access to her own spirituality that her imagination cannot muster alone: “Of Christ as Man I could only think: however much I read about His beauty and however often I

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39 Ibid. 18, my emphasis.

looked at pictures of Him, I could never form any picture of Him myself.\textsuperscript{41} While Teresa’s spiritual emphasis will later shift to one of extreme interiority, in her early spiritual life she feels her imagination is not up to the task. But, like Ignatius before her, the switch to a more interior conception of spirituality coincides with the reading of the life of Saint Augustine:

> When I started to read the \textit{Confessions}, I seemed to see myself in them and I began to commend myself often to that glorious Saint. When I got as far as his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it seemed exactly as if the Lord were speaking in that way to me, or so my heart felt.\textsuperscript{42}

Both Teresa and Ignatius use hagiography to activate their own inner spiritualities, and both do so initially by mimicking the actions and attitudes of the saints about which they read. Stein, in reading these works and writing her own versions of their hagiographies, focuses not on the lives of the two saints but their \textit{post facto} status \textit{as} saints. She alters the genre in this way to better emphasize her project of the evocation of a continuous present – saints being saints as opposed to saints becoming saints – but she retains many of the themes and features of Teresa’s and Ignatius’s works.

In \textit{Four Saints}, Stein continues her project of the play as landscape, and fashions a world in which saints are brought together to “Enact end of an act.”\textsuperscript{43} What Stein’s saints enact is, in some sense, the end of action – since they are all saints being saints, any action depicted is enacted \textit{after the fact} of their having become saints. What sort of agency does a saint have in the world of this text, and what does this world look like? Stein herself provides a useful description of what the world of her opera looks like, and it is worth quoting at length:

> In \textit{Four Saints} I made the Saints the landscape. All the things that I made and I made a number of them because after all a great many pieces of things are in a landscape all of these saints together made my landscape. These attendant saints

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 62.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 63.
were the landscape and it the play really is a landscape…. A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there.\(^4^4\)

Robert Zamsky claims that “Stein clearly has her relationship to cubism in mind here,”\(^4^5\) and while it is useful to imagine the opera as a cubist landscape, this notion elides the very specific temporality and positionality of the saints within their landscape. Though “There are a great many persons and places near together” (16) in this opera, in the first act alone Stein writes “Saint Therese seated” no fewer than eight times, with variations including “Saint Therese not seated” and “Saint Therese once seated” (16-18). Therese herself insists upon this fixity – Stein writes: “Saint Therese was very well parted and apart apart from that. Harry marry saints in place saints and sainted distributed grace. / Saint Therese. In place. / Saint Therese in place of Saint Therese in place” (27). Though there exist “saints in place,” Therese takes fixity one step further, by supplanting herself – Saint Therese places her (spiritual, sanctified) self in the position formerly occupied by her (bodily) self.

Both Ávila and Barcelona are place-names specifically mentioned in the libretto; unsurprising given the focus on two Spanish saints. However, if the saints evoke a particular sense of nationhood, Stein also draws attention to another overt reference to a particular place, given just before the introduction of Saint Therese: “My country tis of thee sweet land of liberty of thee I sing” (14). Above all, it would seem, despite the Spanish place-names and Spanish saints, Stein writes an *American* opera – one in which the world depicted, while still retaining a certain amount of fixity, conflates two distinct national identities, that is, Spanish and American. Further, Stein’s imagination crafts the libretto in such a way as to make assignation of roles at best arbitrary, at worst indeterminable. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous “Vision


of the Holy Ghost” sequence. Dydo remarks that “the vision … stands by itself, sudden, separate, self-contained. Although St. Ignatius sings its words, the scene does not stand out as his personal vision. Rather, it seems a composite vision of St. Ignatius, St. Theresa [sic], and Stein.”

This point is emphasized by the libretto’s lack of assignation of the aria to a particular character. As a vision, however, it seems perfectly banal – atypical of what one might expect ecstatic visions to look like, and certainly atypical of the visions described by the historical saints. But this vision also retains a fixity of place – “pigeons on the grass alas” (36), and is relational to Stein’s original vision of the architecture of her landscape as well as connected to the spiritual in an interesting way:

They [the magpies] look exactly like the birds in the Annunciation pictures the bird which is the Holy Ghost and rests flat against the side sky very high. … There were magpies in my landscape and there were scarecrows. … The scarecrows on the ground are the same thing as the magpies in the sky, they are a part of the landscape.  

The scarecrows (pigeons) are conflated with the magpies, which in turn are conflated with the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Stein conflates Barcelona, Ávila, and America. The world of Stein’s imagination is all-inclusive while retaining distinctions, if only superficially. Stein writes “There is a difference between Barcelona and Avila. What difference” (39). By drawing attention once more what appear to be differences between places and persons, Stein focuses on the difference without difference – the pigeons and the magpie are merely iterations of the same thing.

The landscape of the opera continually shifts, both temporally and physically. Transformation is implied in several of the passages, and preparation figures heavily in what has come to be known as the “prologue” to the opera with which Bridgman takes such umbrage. It is clear that the prologue functions as a narrative of Stein’s process of thought as she sits to write

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46 Dydo, Gertrude Stein 195.
47 Stein, “Plays,” 268.
an opera: “Four saints prepare for saints. … In narrative prepare for saints” (11). She even provides “What happened to-day, a narrative” (11) and lists the quotidian events of the day. But Stein closes this enumeration with “This is how they do not like it” (12) and proceeds to begin again from the beginning of her opera, this time focused more on the specific narratives of the preparation of the staging and introduction of the saints themselves. Stein calls out to the saints: “Why should every one be at home. / In idle acts” (13) as a further invocation of the muse initiated by the first line (“To know to know to love her so” (3), referencing both Therese and Toklas). Evidently, the saints (whose home can only be Heaven) are “in idle acts,” which refers not to the acts of the opera, but rather the idle actions of the saints in Heaven. Stein invokes them as she would a muse – she requests not spiritual intercession, nor artistic intercession, but active intercession. These saints are initially coded as passive – it is only after their literal manifestation on the stage and in the libretto that they gain agency. But of course, this takes some time to set up. Finally Stein announces her (extended) title: “Four saints an opera in three acts,” which is immediately followed by the triumphal “My country tis of thee” (14). At last Stein can begin.

Unfortunately, beginning is not so easy. Acts are repeated, Stein writes multiple scenes five, and the numeration of the acts and scenes appears to be in general disarray. Most curious are the points where Stein seems to work backwards in her narrative – writing a second (or third) scene three to follow scene four, &c. These moments of interruption in the narrative, however, are written very specifically – rather than view them as mere temporal inconsistencies, the repetition and moving (temporally) back and forth is a function not only of Stein’s preparation for and process of writing the opera, but also of the saints’ preparation for and acting within the opera. For example: After Act One, Scene IV, Stein writes: “Scene III / Saint Therese has been prepared for there being summer. / Saint Therese has been prepared for there being summer”
(22). Preparation is the key idea here – the narrative of the opera has not sufficiently accounted for the (in this instance successful) preparation on the part of Saint Therese “for there being summer,” and thus needs to retreat briefly to ensure the proper fitting together of the narrative flow. The association of repetition with preparation occurs throughout the text – Act One preempts Act Two again: “Saint Therese. Preparing in as you might say” (23). After the vision of the Holy Ghost, which occurs in scene two, Stein gives: “Scene One / Saint Ignatius prepared to have examples of windows of curtains…” (36). Stein continually retreats to prepare just as her characters retreat to prepare – though the narrative flow is interrupted, it operates according to a logic ultimately born out through its insistence on preparation and fruition.

The temporality of the opera is not necessarily static; rather, it operates in the continual interplay between the past and the present of its own narrative. Stein writes a back and forth for herself and her characters, a back and forth she will later ascribe to European religion in *Four in America*. Importantly, however, in that later text as well as *Four Saints*, it is a “forward and back standing still.” Stein later writes of *Four Saints*: “the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep in time. … the play as I see it is exciting and it moves but it also stays and that is as I said in the beginning might be what a play should do.”

The temporality of the opera both does and does not change. As Saint Therese asks, “Who mentioned that one followed another laterally” (46).

Stein links this back and forth temporality to memory quite clearly:

> It is very easy in winter to remember winter spring and summer it is very easy in winter to remember spring and winter and summer it is very easy in winter to remember summer spring and winter it is very easy in winter to remember spring and summer and winter. (13)

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48 Stein, *Four in America*, 53.
49 Stein, “Plays,” 269.
This passage, because it is not assigned as dialogue to any character, successfully illustrates the passage of time as a function of Stein’s writing process and the continual back and forth of temporality within the narrative. Stein does not point definitively to any particular setting of time for her opera, though there are hints (“A pleasure April fool’s day a pleasure” (16).) that the opera’s temporal setting might be in spring. Nonetheless, it is fruitful to think of time and temporality in the opera as not being remembered, but rather re-membered – through the continual interplay of preparation and fruition, Stein foregrounds the relationship between the past and the present, illustrating how both can exist simultaneously. Jane Palatini Bowers finds herself confused by this passage, as well as another which follows later in the text: “In the morning to be changed from the morning to the morning in the morning. A scene of changing from the morning to the morning” (25). Bowers writes:

> Change, like memory, is a function of time. To change is to move from one form or identity to another, from the past (before the change) to a different time (after the change). Change cannot occur without the passage of time. Therefore, there cannot be a change from the morning to the morning. If time does not change, then nothing can change.  

Obviously, change can indeed occur from the morning to the morning; indeed it does so every 24 hours. That the change from the morning to the morning does not happen sequentially, that there exists an afternoon and an evening &c. in between the two, is immaterial according to the logic of Stein’s opera. The change from the morning to the morning is yet another illustration of Stein’s project of simultaneous movement and stasis, a change without change. This compression and expansion of temporality also recurs throughout Teresa’s autobiography. She writes about God’s teaching that “when His Majesty so wills He can teach everything in a moment, in a way

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50 Jane Palatini Bowers, "They Watch Me as They Watch This": Gertrude Stein's Metadrama (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 59.
that amazes me."\textsuperscript{51} For Teresa, time is intimately tied to spirituality – she often conceives of “the space of an Ave Maria” to denote a discreet unit of time, and her understanding of the elasticity of time is inflected by her sense of faith. While Stein’s experimentations with the time of narrative precede her work on the opera, it is possible that she might have found in Teresa’s senses of time and spirituality an idea closely aligned with her own.

The quotation from Bowers speaks also to a very different register worth examination – that of being. Bowers remarks that “To change is to move from one … identity to another,” which, while true according to the logic Bowers applies to the text, is not necessarily true according to the text’s own logic. Above all, this is an opera of saints: saints being saints, not saints becoming saints. As such, any change of identity for them is an impossibility – it would enact, as it were, a change “from the morning to the morning.” Saint Teresa reminds us in the first chapter of the \textit{Interior Castle} “that there are many ways of ‘being’ in a place. Many souls remain in the outer court of the castle … You will have to read certain books on prayer which advise the soul to \textit{enter within itself}.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, such an action is enacted throughout the opera: “Saint Therese very nearly half inside and half outside outside the house … Saint Therese about to be” (16). At this point in the narrative, we find Saint Therese’s soul “half inside and half outside” of itself – of the Interior Castle – and thus she is “about to be” a saint. But of course, as presented, she already is a saint. Though Stein does not signal her move as she does elsewhere, these passages indicate a presentation of the simultaneity of being a saint and preparing to be a saint – the actress performing Saint Therese’s role is also, now, performing Therese \textit{prior} to sainthood, such that a change has occurred, but it is simply a change “from the morning to the morning.” This passage, a change without change, in its ecstatic visioning of what seems to be an

\textsuperscript{51} Teresa, \textit{Life}, 86.
\textsuperscript{52} Teresa, \textit{Interior Castle}, 203, my emphasis.
endless paradise of perpetual morning, will be echoed to a somewhat darker degree in Saint Ignatius’s vision of the last judgment:

Saint Ignatius. Once in a while and where and where and where around around is a sound and around is a sound around is a sound and around. Around is a sound around is a sound around is a sound and around. Around differing from annointed now. (42)

Stein links the characters of Therese and Ignatius in several ways, and though Stein sold the opera to female actresses by saying she had “written an opera on the life of St. Theresa at Avila with St. Ignatius in the distance,”53 she offers multiple parallels between the two characters. For example, Ignatius’s vision of the last judgment is, in fact, a modified echo of a speech Therese gives following the “sermon” on the Interior Castle: “Saint Therese. … All to come and go to stand up to kneel and to be around. Around and around and around and as round and as around and as around and as around” (33). This circularity is reminiscent of the change “from the morning to the morning” – “All to come and go to stand up to kneel and to be around” prefigures the actions of the saints and angels at the moment of the last judgment, and the change will be made to the morning of a new world in Christ. Stein presents a circularity of time as seen from a particular vantage point both inside and outside of normal temporality.

The saints are also closely linked by means of the water imagery used throughout the libretto. Stein uses the word “water” several times in the text, and alternate references to rain, snow, tears, and rivers abound. Before Therese is introduced, Stein writes “When she returned there was considerable rain” (14). Later, at the beginning of Act One, Stein writes:

Saint Therese in a storm at Avila there can be rain and warm snow and warm that is the water is warm the river is not warm the sun is not warm and if to stay to cry. If to stay to if to stay if having to stay to if having to stay if to cry to stay if to cry stay to cry to stay. (15)

53 Quoted in Dydo, *Gertrude Stein*, 189n.
Immediately following this pronouncement, Saint Ignatius is mentioned as being “not there” (15), but is mentioned nonetheless – his absent presence has already informed the opening of the act. Any cursory glance at the *Spiritual Diary* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola will reveal countless references to weeping and tears. In painting, he is often depicted with one tear falling on a sponge in one hand, one tear falling on a stone in the other. Teresa, too, writes about God granting her “the gift of tears.” The tears of Saint Ignatius often correspond to his intellectual visions, usually received during the recitation of Mass: “Before the preparatory prayer there was fresh devotion, along with a thought or judgment that I ought to act or be like an angel during the ceremonies of saying Mass; and my eyes gently filled with tears.” Ignatius’s spiritual visions are thus signaled by weeping, and so Therese’s initial scene in Avila links the two through the use of rain imagery and weeping. Similarly, as Ignatius’s spiritual union with God is evoked through his tears, Teresa likens hers to a river – In the final sections of the *Interior Castle* she writes “here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens.” Therese “in a storm at Avila,” though “the river is not warm,” soon there will be no distinction between the water that is warm and the river that is not warm. Again we see the temporary displacement of logical temporality – Therese is a saint, and being a saint, she is beyond time. Therese’s and Ignatius’s mystical unions with Christ have already been achieved, and furthermore, through Stein’s insistence on water imagery, they are united with each other as well: “Saint Therese. Having happily married” (27).

Stein finds in the writings of Saints Teresa and Ignatius a model of union and marriage that resists heteronormative classification. She unites her characters, Therese and Ignatius, by

55 Ignatius, *Writings*, 256.
suggesting that though they have distinct differences in character and emphasis, ultimately they
are united to one another by means of their union with God. George Ganss reminds us in the
General Introduction to the writings of Ignatius of Loyola that “Ignatius’s vision at La Sorta had
a profound and confirming effect on the foundation of the Society and the shape it took. He
perceived himself *intimately united* to Jesus.”57 Indeed, this is almost universally true of saints
and their perceptions of the relationship to God and Christ. This mystical marriage takes several
forms for various saints, but is almost always spoken of in terms of union and marriage. Ignatius
writes:

> And being one day in a church some miles before arrival in Rome, and making
> prayer, he sensed such a change in his soul, and he saw so clearly that God the
> Father was putting him with Christ, his Son, that he would not have the
> willfulness to have any doubt about this: it could only be that God the Father was
> putting him with his Son.58

God here plays matchmaker, of a sort, and in effect gives Christ to Ignatius in marriage. Ignatius
is careful, however, not to confuse traditional marriage gender roles too much – he and Christ are
“put together” in union, and later writings indicate that Ignatius feminizes himself in order to
reconcile the idea of his marriage to Christ. He writes: “At this period of time it occurred to me
that my humility, reverence and submission should be not of a man who fears but of a man who
loves. So strongly did this impress itself upon my soul that with great faith I said: ‘Give me a
lover’s humility.’”59 While Ignatius attempts to preserve traditional heteronormative roles when
discussing his mystical marriage to Christ, his humility is still of a “man who loves,” and his
self-feminization only goes so far. Teresa is much more forthright about her own submission to
the will of God and her submission in her own mystical marriage to Christ. In part, this is due to

(New York: Paulist Press, 1991) 42, my emphasis.
58 Ignatius, *Writings*, 60.
59 Ibid. 103.
the way in which Teresa experiences her visions, and how she describes the sensations afterward. She writes that “when the soul is in union during an actual state of rapture, … all the faculties are wholly lost, and at that time I do not believe there is any seeing, hearing or understanding at all. For the soul is wholly in the power of another, and during that period, … I do not think the Lord leaves it freedom for anything.”60 The way Teresa experiences her visions extends naturally to her understanding of her marriage to Christ – she is, quite simply, a bride of Christ.

While these mystical marriages both complicate heteronormative categorization, only Teresa speaks of her visions and marriage in terms that approach the sexual. Sexuality is completely absent from Ignatius’s conception of his marriage to Christ, and indeed is conspicuously absent even from his own autobiography, aside from a casual mention of setting aside worldly pleasures. Stein finds a model of eroticism in Teresa, however, that clearly pushes against heteronormativity despite its partners being of opposite sexes. Teresa, regarding her early years before entering the Church, writes in her Life that “I began to deck myself out and to try to attract others by my appearance, taking great trouble with my hands and hair, using perfumes and all the vanities I could get.”61 When she enters the convent for the first time, she and her fellow Sisters often occupy themselves with games of vanity – this vanity, this narcissism, is implicitly homoerotic. Her extreme fastidiousness and attention to her own appearance signals a sexuality (though subdued) marked by attention to the feminine. Nevertheless, Teresa’s sexuality is never fully expressed in terms of its relation to other people; rather, Teresa achieves her moments of ecstasy (Bernini’s famous sculpture implies sexual bliss as well as religious) through her visions and union with Christ. Of the Transverberation of Her Heart, she writes:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form. … He was not tall, but short,

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60 Teresa, Life, 198.
61 Ibid. 6.
and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. … In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it.\textsuperscript{62}

Certainly Teresa herself describes this ecstasy in terms that denote an intense, borderline-sexual experience. And since this angel, and indeed even God Himself, are beyond such conventions as gender and sex, this vision is cast in terms almost auto-erotic – the vision, coming from an asexual Being, is internalized by Teresa and felt in sexual terms. Her mystical marriage to Christ operates in a similar register: “He revealed himself to me, in an imaginary vision, \textit{most interiorly}, as on other occasions, and He gave me His right hand, saying to me: ‘Behold this nail. It is a sign that from to-day onward thou shalt be my bride.’”\textsuperscript{63} Stein will echo this when she asks “How many nails are there in it” (25), a reference both to Teresa’s mystical marriage to Christ and the latter’s crucifixion. But the importance of the scene is not in that it represents Christ (a man) united in marriage with Teresa (a woman), but that this re-presentation manifests itself “most interiorly,” which is to say that, like the Transverberation, this vision operates on a register of self-satisfaction, an auto-erotic scene that trades bodily bliss (as presented in the Transverberation) for a spiritual, metaphysical bliss. Teresa calls forth a figure (as does Ignatius) of, if not homosexuality, then at the very least non-normative sexuality. Both of the figures of religiosity Stein selected to portray present bliss, ecstasy, and spiritual joy in terms akin to sexual impulses, and both model marriages that do not fall within the purview of heterosexual marriage. Stein selects characters that call attention to non-traditional marriage, and she finds a model of

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 244.

eroticism that looks not unlike her own homosexuality. In *Four Saints*, then, Stein subtly begins to write the story of her own lesbian marriage to Toklas, fleshing out the themes of difference and mimesis that characterize the hagiography of her lover.

**When this you see remember me: The Mother of Us All**

Stein only collaborated on an opera with Thomson once more, in 1946. This opera, *The Mother of Us All*, was neither published nor staged before Stein’s death in July 1946 – she had finished the libretto quickly, but Thomson was still working on the score. This opera returned, in a way, to the inception of *Four Saints* in that Stein was able to write an opera detailing part of her fascination with American history. This opera, however, dealt with the very recent past in the figure of Susan B. Anthony and the women’s suffrage movement. There is no indication that Stein ever publicly advocated women’s suffrage during her lifetime, thus her choice of subject may seem odd. But while Anthony is without question the opera’s subject, Stein is able to take a broad view of American history, including characters based on historical figures whom the actual Anthony would have been very unlikely to have met in her lifetime. Chief among these is Daniel Webster, but Stein also stages John Quincy Adams, Constance Fletcher, and Ulysses S. Grant, in addition to original characters based not on historical figures from American history but rather, occasionally, amalgamations of Stein’s friends and acquaintances. Stein even writes Virgil Thomson himself into the libretto. This long view of American history allows Stein to bring back many of her recurring themes without having to worry about staying perfectly true to the record. Stein has license, therefore, to set up Webster as an antagonist, and she can envision a companion for Anthony in the character Anne. This greater scope of time also allows Stein, who was still working on the libretto when she began to experience abdominal pains in March of 1946, to recognize and mark this piece as possibly her final work.
Much of the criticism of the opera focuses on the question of marriage. Almost universally, these critics follow the lead of the historical Anthony, appropriating her judgments on the subject of marriage as fully endorsed by Stein. Franziska Gygax, in her discussion of the text, suggests that Anthony envisions a “concept of [the] dynamic, independent self [which] is in sharp contrast to the view of marriage dominant at the time of the historical figure Anthony.”64 This claim is based on Stein’s Anthony rejecting marriage on the grounds that she is “one all one,” which implies more than one “one.”65 The historical Anthony, it is true, never married, though records indicate that she had a number of suitors.66 Gygax, however, turns the fact that Anthony never married into a lesson not to marry that the libretto imparts. Bridgman follows suit, claiming “What in Brewsie and Willie had been, at worst, contempt for the childish American male now in The Mother of Us All became outright hostility.”67 He cites a listing of masculine failings toward the beginning of the opera, as well as the blustery pomposity of the three “V.I.P.s” – three men set up in the text for certain ridicule. He goes on to claim that “Disgust at heterosexual coupling goes undisguised. … The only possible justification for marriage is that it produces women for the guidance of men.”68

As with Four Saints, however, Stein does not recite the positions of her subjects precisely as the historical figures upon whom they are based did – rather, she adds nuance and her own experiences to more fully articulate her own ideas and investments. The Mother of Us All continues to express an interest in the ramifications of marriage which Stein displayed in Four Saints, but widens the scope of marriage to include various types, each of which is presented

64 Franziska Gygax, Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998) 53.
65 Gertrude Stein, The Mother of Us All, in Writings, 1932-1946 (New York: Library of America, 1998) 806. All references to the libretto will henceforth be cited parenthetically.
67 Bridgman, Gertrude Stein, 341.
68 Ibid.
differently. The character of Anthony is not married and does not marry, and she states her reasons for it. Other characters, however, like Jo the Loiterer and Indiana Elliot, desperately desire to get married, but are initially barred from this by Anthony Comstock. It is difficult to imagine Stein siding with Comstock on any subject, and indeed he is held up for ridicule in the text. Stein presents in this opera a myriad of different types and concepts of marriage – some of which she ridicules, but others she lauds. In this way Stein points to her own “marriage” to Toklas – it is not a heterosexual coupling, but it certainly has some of the features of heterosexual coupling, as is particularly evident in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. *The Mother of Us All*, the last extended work Stein ever produced, is a play about marriage but also about differences – gender differences, sexual differences, racial differences. It is also a “secular” hagiography of the historical Susan B. Anthony, a figure which allows Stein to explore her own marriage that is not a marriage and her long life with Toklas.

Unusual for Stein, *The Mother of Us All* contains an interlude following the first act, billed as “Susan B. A Short Story” (788). This irruption of prose, which actually begins the opera in Thomson’s finished score, marks the first appearance of Anne, the fictional companion of Anthony. It is initially unclear what role Anne will play throughout the text, or indeed what precise relationship Stein has constructed for the two women, though Stein hints at how she would like her audience to read the relationship almost immediately: “When this you see remember me said Susan B. / I do said Anne” (789). This rhyming invocation, which recurs throughout Stein’s work, notably in *Four Saints*, is a marker of her relationship to Toklas and also, in the case of this final opera, the words have an added melancholy. While it’s unclear whether Stein had already fallen ill at the time of writing this passage, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, by having Anne respond in the affirmative, Stein is writing her own desire for
remembrance into the text. The direct response from Anne signals a desire for remembrance not (just) from Stein’s audience, but much more personally from Toklas.

Stein only partially fleshes out the relationship between Susan and Anne in the prose interlude – it is clear that Anne is not an unconditionally supportive character: “Anne was reproachful why do you not speak louder she said to Susan B” (Ibid.). Though Anne’s dialogue in the interlude is generally supportive, this moment suggests a more complex relationship between the two women, not unlike the relationship between Stein and Toklas. The relationship between Susan and Anne is dominated by Susan’s presence, but the opera as a whole takes Susan as its central figure, so this is unsurprising. Importantly, Anne acts as a balance – a complementary figure to Susan – who frequently tempers some of Susan’s more incendiary rhetoric and acts as a kind of intermediary.

Stein gives Susan her most controversial rhetoric not on the subject of the cause of women’s suffrage, but on men in general. Bridgman finds his list of the offenses of the male gender in the interlude, and the passage is worth quoting in full:

> Men said Susan B. are so conservative, so selfish, so boresome and said Susan B. they are so ugly, and said Susan B. they are gullible, anybody can convince them, listen said Susan B. they listen to me. Well said Anne anybody would. I know said Susan B. I know anybody would I know that. (Ibid.)

What for Bridgman is a straightforward list of the ways in which men are irredeemable is subtly subverted by the interplay between the two characters, and by the ways in which the rest of the text bears out Anthony’s claims. Though Stein appears to set up the fact that men listen to Anthony as a mark of their gullible natures, Anne’s response is to say that “anybody would” listen to Anthony. The differences between the sexes that Anthony has enumerated are shown to be a function not of the characteristics of the genders as such, but rather in relation to the presence and power of Anthony’s oratory. “Anybody would” listen to Anthony, and in this way
men are conservative only *in relation to* Anthony. The differences between men and women, then, at least in their penchant for listening to Anthony, are not really differences at all, which Anne helpfully points out.

The importance of naming, a process of differentiation, is stressed in the opera, and Stein uses one of her characters to provide an entry into her own biography. The first character on stage, apart from Virgil T. who sings the prologue, is Daniel Webster. Webster’s appearance is perhaps most noteworthy for the response it elicits in the other characters, all of whom immediately sing “Daniel was my father’s name. My father’s name was Daniel” (782). Following this, Stein’s character “G. S.” explains that “My father’s name was Daniel he had a black beard he was not tall not at all tall, he had a black beard his name was Daniel” (Ibid.). While “Virgil T.” will appear again at multiple points throughout the opera, this is the only scene to feature “G. S.” Bridgman suggests that this piece of autobiography indicates that “Daniel Stein still fixed his daughter’s course,” implying at least in part that the antipathy toward men displayed throughout the text has a basis in an antipathy Stein felt for her own father. It is more reasonable, however, to suggest that this is an immediate link that Stein is making with her own history and that of the historical Anthony, whose father’s name was also Daniel. In Stein’s text, however, Anthony remarks that she “had a father, Daniel was not his name” (Ibid.). Here Stein carves out a space of difference between her character and the historical figure upon whom she is based. Stein’s character claims her father’s name was not Daniel, putting distance between herself and Webster, as well as between herself and the other characters. Stein inserts herself into

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69 Additionally, Dydo reminds us that Stein’s own politics were conservative-leaning. She spoke out against Roosevelt’s New Deal, significantly, suggesting that whatever opinions of men Stein’s character may have, they are not necessarily shared by Stein herself.

70 Thomson scores this particular passage with a melody borrowed from the popular children’s song “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” suggesting possibly that Webster’s influence has an infantilizing effect on the other characters.

71 Thomson, in his score, is not as coy as Stein; he names the character “Gertrude S.”

72 Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein*, 342.
the text not only to link her own narrative with that of the historical Anthony’s, but also to immediately subvert that linkage by insisting that, as similar as they may be in this scene and others, Stein has not written herself neatly into the figure of Anthony. Similarly, since the text does not fully support a reading of Stein as Anthony, it cannot support a straight reading of Toklas as Anne. While it is clear that, in moments, each character takes on aspects of the individual lovers, these aspects are diffuse and always already interchangeable. The two characters complete one another – while Susan is clearly the dominant figure, Anne is constantly revising and amending what Susan says in order to make her speeches more clear to the other characters and to the audience. She prods Susan to explain herself, she repeats key phrases of the previous speech in order to emphasize the points, and is able to anticipate Susan’s lines of thought. As with Therese and Ignatius in *Four Saints*, neither character can exist without the presence of the other.

Stein further emphasizes this difference without difference in the penultimate scene of the opera, in which Susan and Anne (later joined by the rest of the cast) discuss the passage of the fourteenth amendment to the United States Constitution. Since the historical Anthony tried to wed the African-American suffrage movement to the women’s suffrage movement, the fourteenth amendment was a particularly severe blow. Stein dramatizes this moment with a sarcastic exchange between Susan and Anne, in which Anne remarks that men truly listen to Susan. Susan responds by remarking “Yes it is wonderful as the result of my work for the first time the word male has been written into the constitution of the United States concerning suffrage. Yes it is wonderful” (810-811). Susan goes on to say that while men do have “kind hearts,” the reason for this verbiage is, fundamentally, fear:

They fear women, they fear each other, they fear their neighbor, they fear other countries and then they hearten themselves in their fear by crowding together and
following each other, and when they crowd together and follow each other they are brutes, like animals who stampede, and so they have written in the name male into the United States constitution, because they are afraid of black men because they are afraid of women, because they are afraid afraid. Men are afraid. (811)

It is not, then, that the differences between men and women are insurmountable – as Anne reminds Anthony, women, too, are afraid – but that the difference is in degree rather than kind. Susan insists that if a woman is afraid it is only a fear for her children, whereas men are afraid for themselves. Nevertheless, Susan will continue to fight for suffrage, though she realizes that when they will be able to vote “it will do them no good because having the vote they will become like men, they will be afraid, having the vote will make them afraid” (812). Anne, at this point, “bursts into tears” (812).

In this extended passage Stein brings her play’s attention to difference into the register of mimesis. Thanks in part to Susan’s work, the fourteenth amendment was passed, giving African American men the right to vote. This is a real difference from times previously, but as far as Susan’s primary cause is concerned, it is a difference without difference. That she later suggests the difference between men and women will, upon realization of women’s suffrage, vanish completely indicates that the vote is the fundamental – if not the only – difference between men and women; once they can vote, women will become afraid like men. If women have the vote and will therefore become like men, then what use marriage? Bridgman, as noted above, insists that Stein claims marriage is only good to provide men the counsel of women. Bridgman refers here to a passage from the beginning of a long scene that takes marriage in general as its subject, where says “I know I know and I have told you so, but if no one marries how can there be women to tell men, women to tell men” (803). One might reasonably claim that this passage implies the purposelessness of marriage in the face of suffrage – once women have the vote, they will no longer need to exercise their influence over their husbands in order to participate in the
democratic process. Indeed, one of the popular objections to women’s suffrage was that they already had the vote, since their husbands voted for them. This claim seems difficult to reconcile, however, with the rest of the scene, and indeed the rest of the opera, in which marriage plays such a vital role. Most of the principal characters discuss marriage with one another at various points in the opera, and most of the men spend a fair amount of time courting the women – John Adams courts Constance Fletcher, Jo the Loiterer courts Indiana Elliott, and even Daniel Webster, of a fashion, courts Angel More. All of these characters appear in the marriage scene, and all have various positions on the action taking place. Susan, after explaining the necessity of marriage for the instruction of men, says of Jo and Indiana: “Let them marry” (803), installing herself as a figure of a certain authority – a father figure whose permission is sought for the marriage to take place. Indiana’s brother, Anthony Comstock, forbids the marriage from taking place, but he is forcibly removed from the stage and the scene ends happily.

Marriage is frequently discussed in mimetic terms which focus on particular actions and speech-acts that signify certain desires. Jo explains his marriage to Indiana by saying “I tell her if she marries me do I marry her” (803). This conditional implies a mimetic structure to the vows of marriage – it is only upon Indiana marrying Jo that Jo shall marry Indiana. Similarly, Stein focuses again on kneeling (doubtless taking into account the religious valences of the word) throughout her exploration of the principal men’s courtships. John Adams explains to Constance Fletcher that “it is a great pleasure that I kneel at your feet, but I am Adams, I kneel at the feet of none, not any one, dear Miss Constance Fletcher … if I had not been an Adams I would have kneeled at your feet” (792). Here Stein plays on the symbolic nature of kneeling during courtship to mock Adams’s position with respect to the sovereignty of women. Since he is an Adams (presumably John Quincy Adams), and kneeling, for his family, retains the sense of submission
to the English throne, he will not kneel in his courtship of Constance Fletcher. Stein holds Adams up for ridicule for this position later in the marriage scene, when he remarks that “I never marry I have been twice divorced but I have never married, fair Constance Fletcher fair Constance Fletcher do you not admire me that I never can married be” (803). That Adams might be twice divorced, given his reluctance to acknowledge even a symbolic sovereignty of women during courtship, seems unsurprising. But Stein’s primary focus is on the difference between marriage and divorce – one cannot be divorced without having first been married – and the confusion of terms that are themselves markers of joining and separation. In Adams’s formulation, “marriage” and “divorce” both as words and as concepts are evacuated of real meaning. Daniel Webster takes this up in his courtship of Angel More: “When I have joined and not having joined have separated and not having separated have led, and not having led have thundered, when I having thundered have provoked and having provoked have dominated, may I dear Angel More not kneel at your feet because I cannot kneel” (804). Stein characterizes the great orator here as a blustering fool who, like Adams, refuses to kneel before the women he loves. The “thundering” of Webster’s oration is here transformed into a circular pattern of contradictions that confuse temporality and difference.

Susan B., of course, never marries. Like the historical Anthony, Stein’s character does not marry not because of her disdain for men, but rather primarily because of her work. She explains her refusal to marry in ontological terms: “I am not married and the reason why is that I have had to do what I have had to do, I have had to be what I have had to be, I could never be one of two I could never be two in one as married couples do and can, I am but one all one, one

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73 Stein, however, does not only hold her men up to ridicule as some critics, including Bridgman, would have it. Flechther’s response to this passage is a vapid “So beautiful. It is so beautiful to meet you here, so beautiful, so beautiful to meet you here dear, dear John Adams, so beautiful to meet you here” (804), suggesting that Stein foregrounds not only the differences between men and women but the differences among women.
and all one, and so I have never been married to any one” (805-806). What Susan has had to do, of course, is fight for the cause of women’s suffrage, and what she has had to be is the leader of that cause. She has been metaphorically wedded to her work. But, having already commented on Stein’s insistence on the inseparability of Susan and Anne, it is interesting to note that Anne, immediately following this speech, amends the account slightly. Where earlier in the scene Anne has proclaimed that she would never marry, now she counters: “But I I have been, I have been married to what you have been to that one” (806). That “one” may indeed be a plural one (the “all one” informing Gygax’s argument), but it is irrefutably Susan in some form or another. Anne proclaims that she has been married, essentially, to Susan, to which Susan responds “No no, no, you may be married to the past one, the one that is not the present one, no one can be married to the present one, the one, the one, the present one” (806). Like the earlier confusion of marriage and divorce, here Stein robs marriage of its transcendent temporality. Anne may be married to the past one, but not to the present one. Why not? It is possible that Anne can only be married to the past Susan inasmuch as the present Susan is married herself to the cause. More significantly, this scene is the last in which Susan appears alive – in a very real sense, Stein has written the end of Susan and the only Susan left for Anne to have been married to is the past one. Similarly, it is not unlikely that the end of Stein’s own life is reflected in this moment of discussion between the two women. It is a marriage that is not a marriage – Anne has said that she will never marry, and then has immediately said that she is married. John Adams has never married, but he has divorced twice. And Susan did not marry, though several (including the historical Anthony) suggested she was married to the cause. This opera, with its subversion of courtship roles, gender difference, and its confusion of marriage, divorce, joining, and separation, enacts several marriages, only one of which is recognizable according to the
traditional definition: the marriage of Jo and Indiana. It is as though Stein’s project is to “separate marriage from marriage” (804).

Susan emphasizes this separation by inquiring into the nature of marriage itself: “What is marriage, is marriage protection or religion, is marriage renunciation or abundance, is marriage a stepping-stone or an end. What is marriage” (805).74 The definition of marriage in The Mother of Us All is capacious enough to fit all of these definitions and more, and none of them, individually, can sufficiently describe marriage as an institution, let alone the varied iterations found in the text. By having Susan pose this question, Stein means both to attach these definitions to marriage and also to divorce them from it. In particular, the tension between marriage and religion continues to animate Stein’s thinking in this opera. Earlier, in the wedding scene, Susan gathers everyone, very much like an officiant: “We are all here to celebrate the civil and religious marriage of Jo the Loiterer and Indiana Elliott,” to which Jo responds by asking “Who is civil and who is religious” (804). Again, Stein humorously interrogates the dual nature of marriage – the civil nature and the religious nature – by voicing that marriage is both civil and religious as well as neither civil nor religious, and also that one of the partners in the union is civil, one religious.

Susan’s marriage to the cause is not a civil one, but Stein suggests that it is, in fact, a religious one. Of all the characters who reference religion and religious feeling, Susan most frequently invokes the state of martyrdom. Martyrdom, for Susan, is somewhat contrary to the conventional understanding, and it is in the discussions of martyrdom that Stein most forcefully voices her conception of Anthony as a sainted figure. Susan says early in the opera: “I enter into a tabernacle I was born a believer in peace, I say fight for the right, be a martyr and live, be a

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74 To this, Anne offers the only answer she can: “I will never marry.”
coward and die, and why, because they, yes they, sooner or later go away” (788). Martyrdom, for Susan, is intimately related to the cause, and whereas the traditional realization of martyrdom comes at the moment of death, for Susan true martyrdom consists in continuing to fight. This was true of the historical Anthony as well, who also linked religion to the cause. She spoke of the “‘divine discontent’ of women, since until ‘women are enfranchised, they cannot be considered free moral agents.’”75 Since Anthony was, predictably, accused of irreligiousness, she was routinely forced to field questions about her own spirituality in interviews.76 When asked if she prayed, she responded: “I pray every single second of my life; not on my knees but with my work. My prayer is to lift women to equality with men. Work and worship are one with me.”77

So too with Stein’s character. At the close of the opera, after Susan has died and the other characters have gathered around a statue of Susan after the passage of the nineteenth amendment granted women’s suffrage, Susan’s voice emanates from behind the statue. While the other characters are primarily concerned with their own narratives as they have played out in the opera, Susan speaks only three times, on three different subjects: her first short speech is on the vote, her second alludes to sexuality and procreation, and the final speech reflects on her own life. The second speech, in which Susan says “if there are no children there are no men and women, and if there are men and women, it is rather horrible” (817) fuels Bridgman’s claim that Stein takes a disdainful view not only of men but of heterosexual coupling itself. Despite this, however, Jo and Indiana end the opera still married, and still happily so. The vote has provided the catalyst for a different way of thinking, especially for those male characters, like Jo, who already understood the fight for equality that preceded the fight for suffrage. While Susan may say that “it is a

75 Sherr, Failure, 247.
76 Sherr points out that “Anthony took pride in her own Quaker background, and always identified herself as a Friend, even though her family had switched to the Unitarian church when the Rochester Quakers did not support the Anthony position against slavery” on page 248.
77 Ibid. 249.
puzzle” if there are men and women, and while this may indicate a final veiled reference to Stein’s own sexuality, it does not conclusively indicate a disdain for all heterosexual coupling given the rest of the opera’s emphasis on marriage.

Susan’s final speech is profoundly melancholy, and the scene is explicitly religious – the remaining characters gather near this statue and bow to it – the scene is set in the “Congressional Hall,” a secular site made sacred by the statuary and the attitudes of the characters. Having already connected martyrdom with living and fighting, Susan sings about her long life, reminding those gathered there that “we cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards. We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps” (819). Stein explicitly offers an example of difference without difference – going forward may be the same as going backwards – but this does not mean that progress is impossible, rather that progress may not appear to be progress. The circularity of repetition with a difference advances the narrative of Susan’s life, just as it has done throughout Stein’s work – “we cannot retrace our steps,” and indeed Stein’s work never did. Susan’s emphasis is not on the ends but on the means: “I was a martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done” (819). It is the work which has defined Susan’s life, and the work which has been the most fulfilling. Since it is difficult to read this final scene without a sense of Stein’s own life coming to a close, it is reasonable to surmise that Stein, too, is most concerned with her work – the process and production of writing – more than the finished products. This process, intimately dependent upon the participation of Toklas, is ultimately the product of both women.

I am going to write it for you: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, published in 1933, is perhaps the fullest and most clear expression of Stein’s hagiographical project, and is most clearly the product of both Stein
and Toklas. It chronicles not just the life of Stein’s lover Toklas, but also her own life – after the
two meet in Paris in 1907 they are so inseparable that writing the memoirs of one person
amounts essentially to the memoirs of the other – and while it announces itself as an
autobiography, the chapter chronicling Toklas’s life before she met Stein is a scant three pages;
the two chapters detailing Stein’s life before she met Toklas total about twenty times that
number. For this reason, it is useful to think of the text in terms suggested by Anne Herrmann, in
her book *Queering the Moderns*: as an “auto/biography” which melds two separate but related
genres to detail the lives of two separate but related women.\(^78\)

As a hagiography, though, Stein only occasionally broaches religious subjects, most
frequently in the service of explaining inspiration behind texts she was working on at the time.
She mentions their trip to Ávila, and discusses her favorite saints during the build up to the
writing of *Four Saints*. Beyond that, however, the *Autobiography* is a text nearly devoid of
explicitly religious content, even more so than the secular hagiography of *The Mother of Us All*,
in which Stein writes a secular saint that, ultimately, proves to be considerably more sacred than
secular. In what sense, then, can the *Autobiography* be read as a hagiography? Over the course of
her work, Stein repeatedly transfers her cathexis from Toklas onto her various characters. She
writes Toklas into Therese and Ignatius, and into Susan B. and Anne. Both of the operas provide
accounts of the lives of their respective saints – *Four Saints* chronicles the lives of the saints
being saints, and *The Mother of Us All* chronicles the lives and afterlives of one of the primary
figures behind the cause of women’s suffrage. Now, with the *Autobiography*, Stein is able to
write the life of her lover directly – the themes she began to investigate in *Lend a Hand or Four
Religions* and continued to explore through *Four Saints* and *Four in America* right through to her

\(^{78}\) Anne Herrmann, *Queering the Moderns: Poses/Portraits/Performances* (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 99.
final major work can now take as their object the domestic life of the woman she knew so well. If, as de Lauretis contends, it takes two women to make a lesbian, it also takes two women to write a hagiography, two women to write an auto/biography.

The brief paragraph in the Autobiography about the favorite saints of Stein and Toklas is worth quoting in full:

I did have to take one hot walk that summer. Gertrude Stein insisted that no one could go to Assisi except on foot. She has three favourite saints, Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint Theresa of Avila and Saint Francis. I alas have only one favourite saint, Saint Anthony of Padua because it is he who finds lost objects and as Gertrude Stein’s elder brother once said of me, if I were a general I would never lose a battle, I would only mislay it. Saint Anthony helps me find it. I always put a considerable sum in his box in every church I visit. At first Gertrude Stein objected to this extravagance but now she realises its necessity and if I am not with her she remembers Saint Anthony for me. 79

What appears at first glance to be a humorous anecdote detailing Stein’s frustrations with Toklas’s absent-mindedness which only coincidentally relates to a religious figure can also be viewed as a key to interpretation. While Stein’s affection for Teresa and Ignatius are well established, the insertion of Anthony of Padua, also venerated as a marriage saint, is interesting inasmuch as it speaks to the function of memory in an autobiography. It calls into question, well before the text’s famous conclusion, the reliability of the narrator – if Toklas is constantly forgetting, losing, and mislaying objects, it seems very likely that she will do the same in her memoirs. While no memoir is perfectly accurate, Toklas’s forgetfulness is characterized here as excessive. Indeed, Stein remembers Saint Anthony for her if Stein enters a church without her, and from this one might further surmise that Saint Anthony is not the only thing Stein remembers for Toklas – Stein is in the process of remembering an entire life for Toklas in the form of the Autobiography. While this paragraph is not religious in the same way that texts like Four Saints

or *Lend a Hand* are, it provides a useful line of inquiry based on the life and veneration of a popular saint – Anthony’s inclusion begs the question: What is lost in this text?

Herrmann suggests a link between the genres of autobiography and the detective story, Stein’s favorite, as a possible answer to this question. She writes “Autobiography resembles the detective story in as much as it chronicles the death of a past self.” This statement comes in a discussion of Stein’s meeting with Dashiell Hammett, during which they agreed that nineteenth-century male writers wrote fictions and female writers wrote autobiographically. In the twentieth century, they also agreed, those roles seemed to have reversed. Stein thought of the *Autobiography* as “audience-writing,” that is, a text that was written very specifically to appeal to a particular readership with which she had theretofore concerned herself very little. While it is not an autobiography, neither is it, precisely, a detective story – Stein does not write the death of a self, even a past self, since even at the end of the text, the selves she writes continue to the time of writing. While there is no death of the self in the text *per se*, there is certainly a metamorphosis of the self. At the conclusion of the first chapter detailing Toklas’s life before she came to Paris, Stein writes “In this way my new full life began” (661). As Gygax points out, “Stein speaking for Toklas through Toklas’s voice obviously also speaks for herself.” The meeting of Stein and Toklas has a profound effect on both women, and their “new full life” begins at that moment – a life together. It can be argued that this sentence marks a death of the individual self and a birth of the dual self – the self represented by neither Stein nor Toklas separately, but both of them together.

What is lost, or perhaps laid by, in the *Autobiography* is thus Stein and Toklas as individual persons. The final paragraph of the text makes this clear:

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80 Herrmann, *Queering the Moderns*, 93.
81 Gygax, *Gender and Genre*, 67.
About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (913)

While the text contains formal hints as to its actual authorship prior to this paragraph (such as the disparity in length of the pre-Paris chapters for each woman), this paragraph stands as the joke upon which the entire text turns, albeit a very serious joke. Stein announces that she herself has written the text in the voice of Toklas – she had previously resisted writing a memoir – and that writing so convincingly in the voice of another is yet another proof of her own genius. Dydo takes a relatively cynical view of the move: “This puts the best possible light on the affair and allows Stein, against all her earlier refusals, to get away with a book of memoirs, not her kind of writing, as a favor to Toklas.” The ending of the text, however, is much more radical than that. The final paragraph turns the Autobiography into neither an autobiography nor a biography, but rather a piece of fiction, just as Stein and Hammett had agreed. Just as Defoe wrote the “autobiography” of Crusoe, Stein has written Toklas as a fictional character. Toklas the woman is lost in the text – the final paragraph, in its fictionalization of the text that precedes it, emphasizes that what the reader took for Toklas’s presence and voice has actually been a very clever mimicry. Toklas the woman, though the voice of the text may convince even the most intimate friends, is laid aside retroactively by the final paragraph – she does not appear in the text as anything other than a fictional character.

The same can be said, however, for Stein, a fact that most criticism often overlooks. Since the entire narrative has been fictionalized by the final paragraph, and Toklas has been turned from a person into a character, it is reasonable to surmise that Stein has turned herself into a character as well. Stein sets herself up immediately as a genius, and it is this genius version of

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82 Dydo, *Gertrude Stein*, 536.
the real woman that is described throughout the text. Stein thus doubly removes herself from the text – she writes herself in her lover’s voice as a character resembling the person she desires to be recognized as: “I must say that only three times in my life I have met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken…. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead” (660-661). These three geniuses of whom Toklas “wish[es] to speak” are indeed three geniuses of whom Stein herself wishes to speak – Stein crafts for herself a persona of genius and wishes that others will see her as such. In this way Stein is doubly lost in the Autobiography. She is first lost by her own design, by writing the text in a style that does not resemble her usual one, and indeed which is so effective a mimicry of Toklas’s style of speech that the publishers were unsure as to which woman actually wrote the text. But the second loss occurs in the fictionalization of the facts – Stein’s desire for recognition as a genius prompts her to write her own character as if she were a genius.

Toklas, then, serves as an intermediary between the author and the audience, between the text and the historical facts. As Anna Linzie, in her 2006 study of the “autobiographies” of Alice B. Toklas, suggests, “Not only in Stein’s life but also in The Autobiography, Toklas functions as a medium or conduit between Stein and the world, specifically Stein and her readers. Ever since The Autobiography was published, critics have recognized Toklas’s function as a go-between.” Toklas mediates the reader’s access to Stein’s work not just in terms of the voice of the Autobiography, but more practically and tangibly in terms of her role as typist and interpreter of Stein’s notoriously inscrutable handwriting. While few would claim that Toklas amended or revised wholesale passages of Stein’s work, it is certainly the case that she prepared Stein’s handwritten manuscripts for publication by typing them up and handling, in many cases, their

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publication in the Plain Editions. Similarly, as some critics, including Linzie, have argued, the Toklas of the *Autobiography* enables the genius of Stein. As Gygax points out, “Although Stein makes Toklas present her as a genius, Toklas herself is also given a very special status as she is capable of knowing whether a person is a genius or not.”*84* The conclusion of the first chapter of the *Autobiography* complicates a reading of the text as an example of Stein appropriating Toklas’s voice and character in order to write a piece she was previously unwilling to write. The character of Stein cannot exist as a genius without Toklas to recognize that genius – indeed, coming as the passage does at the very start of the *Autobiography*, this recognition of genius enables the genius of the ensuing text, as well.

The character of Toklas complements and completes the character of Stein, just as the character of Stein completes and complements the character of Toklas. In this way, the *Autobiography* continues to write the hagiography of union – Therese and Ignatius, Susan B. and Anne, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas – and what Stein writes are the autobiographies of a partnership. The final paragraph splits and confuses the senses of subject and object in the text – ostensibly in an autobiography, the subject writing and the object about which the text is written are one and the same.*85* But in Stein’s auto/biography, the subject and the object are both the same and not the same, different yet not different.

That the *Autobiography* is a text about a union, even a marriage, between two women at one of its most fundamental levels is a reading shared by several critics, though most are careful to point out that the text excises all explicit reference to sexuality and lesbianism. Herrmann notes that the text “publicizes the stability of its marriage, by opposing it to the myriad

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*84* Gygax, *Gender and Genre*, 68.
*85* *Pace* Herrmann and her claim regarding the “death of a past self.”
infidelities of opposite-sex couplings, such as Picasso’s.”

Some critics, like Gygax and Linzie, find the “marriage” troubling, since it seems in their view to reinforce the heteronormative aspects of marriage. Gygax suggests that this is, at least in part, a convenience of marketing: “A heterosexual audience that does not know about Stein and Toklas’s relationship would not necessarily recognize the two women as lesbians,” and that this audience accepted the portrayal of the homosexual union “because it is presented as a heterosexual arrangement.”

Linzie takes traditional readings of the text to task, suggesting that those critics who view the Autobiography as an example of a diminished Stein self in the service of a style of writing more palatable to the general public, “association with the lesbian lover diminishes or miniaturizes the great author.”

Linzie points out, as does Herrmann, that turning Toklas into a fictional character, namely “Alice B. Toklas,” splits the subject – Alice Toklas is the lover, Alice B. Toklas the secretary. Toklas’s reputation and fame in America is built upon her portrayal in the Autobiography, a portrayal that does not tell the whole story.

While these concerns are valid, it is important to remember that Stein has performed her fictionalizing move on herself as well. The difference between Alice B. Toklas and Toklas the woman is as great as the difference between Gertrude Stein and Stein the woman. Linzie focuses on the enabling gesture at the end of the first chapter to argue that the Autobiography is less the story of Toklas or Stein and more the story of the two of them together. Read in light of other Stein texts, however, the mimetic move Stein makes in writing in her lover’s voice suggests the transfer of cathexis from Toklas to Alice B. Toklas has as its real effect the conflation of subject and object. The only difference, in other words, between Alice B. Toklas the character and Stein

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86 Herrmann, Queering the Moderns, 101.
87 Gygax, Gender and Genre, 65.
88 Linzie, The True Story, 71.
the writer is a difference without difference. Similarly, when their new full lives begin upon meeting one another, the difference between Stein and Toklas collapses – their full lives are just that: full of one another, finally complete. The work, then, is what marks the difference between the two lovers, and in this way can be thought of in terms of de Lauretis’s lesbian fetish. The work itself, the hagiographical project whereby Stein writes the life of Toklas and of their relationship together over the course of several texts, is what marks the difference and the desire between the lovers. In *Four Saints*, Stein finds a model of eroticism in religiosity that provides her with a new way of talking about her own eroticism and relationship. In *The Mother of Us All*, Stein secularizes that religiosity in order to more fully explore a paragon of American femininity – and explore the relationship of that particular femininity to the institution of marriage. In the *Autobiography*, losing Toklas and Stein in the characters created allows Stein to find their own relationship – the text collapses subject and object to indicate that both Stein and Toklas are both subject and object simultaneously. Like de Lauretis suggests, the fantasy that the two women share – the fantasy of the *Autobiography* – depends upon them both. They are both desiring subjects, both desiring objects. Toklas animates the two operas just as much as she does the *Autobiography*, and at the conclusion of the latter text, Stein provides the ultimate mimetic gesture, the supreme difference without difference. Just as the real Saints Teresa and Ignatius turned to historical saints in order to mimic their thinking and actions to sanctify their own lives, Stein too has turned to the saints, to Susan B. Anthony, and to Alice Toklas herself, mimicking each of them in turn to sanctify her writing and her relationship.