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Seminar on *Playing House: Domestic and Theatrical Space*

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Gertrude Stein's Parlour Play

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to Carol Dougherty and Karen Bassi for organizing this seminar. It has offered me a timely opportunity to present some writing and thinking in connection with a critical sound project I am currently pursuing, called *Radio Free Stein*, that renders a number of Gertrude Stein's plays in the medium of recorded sound. The intentions of this project are both aesthetic and critical: producing sonic stagings of Stein's plays--by workshopping them with good Stein readers, collaborating with composers who are informed by the history of twentieth-century American experimental music, and inviting talented directors, actors and singers to give voice to these plays--lets me develop new interpretations of them. Last fall composer Dorothy Chang (School of Music, UBC) and I completed a recording of Stein's *White Wines. Three Acts*. I've taken the opportunity of this seminar to "write up my results," as it were, and this afternoon I'll offer a reading of this play as an exploration of the almost definitional relations between theater and domesticity. As I read it, *White Wines* takes us through the process of finding or making a new space of sexual, emotional, and architectural containment for the work of composition or writing. I will try to explain what I mean by "containment," a term that I borrow from the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, towards the end of this paper.

First, some background on the play and Stein's theater poetics more generally. *White Wines*, one of Stein's earliest plays, was written in the winter or spring of 1913. Carl van Vechten, then the drama critic for the *New York Press*, expressed immediate

interest in publishing her first plays in a Sunday supplement of that newspaper. But Stein did not want them published before they were performed, and also refused the poet Donald Evans' request to publish a volume of her plays through his Claire Marie press.¹ *White Wines* would not be performed in the 19-teens (Stein would include it in *Geography and Plays* (1922)), and, as it turned out, the play seems not to have been performed until the 1990s.² Neither has it been subject to much critical discussion. Jane Palatini Bowers, in what is by far the most significant study of Stein's theater (what she calls Stein's "metadrama"), mentions the play briefly in describing the gradual emergence of Stein's playwriting from literary portraiture and still lives.³ I have found almost no other references to the play in the critical literature, and certainly no readings.

Of course, what it means to give a "reading" of any Stein composition is far from obvious. Even in the context of Stein's infamous "difficulty," her plays pose unusual challenges because they tend not to distinguish between theatrical elements. Some questions that any reader of a Stein play faces almost immediately include: How many voices are there? Is a given sentence a line of dialogue or a stage direction? What is the setting? What to do about titles, scene structure, and so on. My own approach to Stein's theater takes a cue from the lecture called "Plays" that she wrote for her U.S. lecture tour twenty years after she began writing plays. Consider this interesting comment:

I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits.

I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play.⁴

Stein wrote her first plays not long after completing *A Long Gay Book*, which along with *GMP* and *Many Many Women* comprise prose portraits of couples, triples, and small groups. Her plays continue this project of exploring aggregates of individuals in epistemological relation: they are experiments in group psychology that depict relations of knowing among a (generally small) number of people without using narrative. I have found a variety of theoretical approaches to affect or emotion helpful for thinking about and working with Stein's plays, in particular, the work of the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins and the object relations theory of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion. In a chapter from my recent book *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* I have argued that Stein's plays and her landscape poetics raise this question: How can one think, know, and make contact with groups in the environment of modernist technologies, such as radio, film, and television, powerful theatrical and affective technologies that take on the function of representing groups to themselves? I believe that Stein's plays and theater poetics have been influential for avant-garde and other non-naturalist performance in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries because they insistently pose the fundamental question of how to know and represent groups.

There is clearly a group depicted in *White Wines*: after listing the play's three acts ("1. All together/ 2. Witnesses/ 3. House to house") Stein gives us the parenthetical direction "(5 women)." In her manuscript notebook Stein names these women, four of which are legible: Harriet, Jane, Sylvia, and Therese. Based on this direction, the composer and I decided to cast the play for four singers and a percussionist who occasionally vocalizes. Here's a sample from the start of the play:

[play the first 30" of Act1 Sc1]

We begin with a playful fugal sequence of chase, escape, capture, in which we can hear a strong concern for "home" or going home. In our interpretation, Act One ("All together," or "in your altogether") offers changing configurations of bodies in sexual and domestic relation, emphasizing acts or gestures ("not cunning enough for wit and a stroke and careless laughter"), household objects (such as pets, "a touching spoon"), food and various bodily imperatives (such as "Change the sucking with a little sucking").

Stein wrote this play around the time her brother Leo moved out of their shared accommodations in Paris, the well known salon at 27, rue de Fleurus. In her dual biography of the Stein siblings *Sister Brother*, Brenda Wineapple has explored the intricacies of the Gertrude-Leo relationship. At one time very close, their relations came under increasing strain as Leo dismissed his sister's writing; neither did he initially appreciate Alice Toklas, who had been introduced to Gertrude in 1907 and moved in with the Steins in the summer of 1910. Over the course of the next few years Alice Toklas would come to take on the role of Gertrude's primary partner and support. In 1913 Leo began the process of leaving the Paris apartment, and his decision to move to Florence that fall required the siblings to split up the household, their art collection, finances, and furniture. Gertrude and Alice began looking for a new place to live, but in the end decided to stay in the apartment. This was, however, the end of the relationship between Gertrude and Leo: after 1914, they never spoke to one another again.

In *White Wines* Stein takes up these intensive reconfigurations of domesticity. If Act One depicts the process of making a new space for sexualized domesticity - her marriage to Alice - Act Two calls upon others to witness, stabilize, and develop the new arrangement. In our interpretation, the scenes in this section depict the women in the play

having a dinner party: getting dressed, welcoming the guests, eating. Here's a sample from the middle of Act 2:

[play Act2 Sc2b, 1']

Here the women rearticulate their domestic space, and in other scenes we hear snippets of dinner conversation: comments on the dishes and silverware ("a splendid spout of little cups and colds...a splendid glass"), a drunken declamation ("in the condition of pretty nearly saying that yesterday is today, and tomorrow, tomorrow is yesterday"), and dessert. Marriage and the domesticity that so often accompanies it are themselves theatrical phenomena, experienced not only from within but also displayed and seen by others. In short, a marriage or domestic arrangement (or rearrangement) requires witnesses to be authenticated, stabilized, and developed.

Stein often wrote at night. After the salon evenings she would stay up late to work, and sleep in the next morning. In Act Three of our play, the guests have all gone home and we enter a quieter space of composition. The scenes, as we interpret them, comprise a series of meditations on habit, change, and composition as it makes nature strange. Here is the second scene on change.

[play Act3 Sc2, 2'40"]

By contrast with "habit" in the previous scene, change is primarily defined negatively: "no touch and buzzing and cruelty," "no darkness and swinging and highness," "not place," "not church," "not more clad." For Stein, change cannot be simply located in space or observed by the bodily senses, but is rather a function of composition: "a real change is made by a piece, by any piece by a whole mixture of words and likenesses." Composition itself effects change, it would seem, or at least can effect the "kind" of

change that Stein values most, that which belongs to what she later calls "the human mind." In *The Geographical History of America* (1936), subtitled "the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind," she offers her most elaborate thinking on composition. She asserts that, while "Human nature is what any human being will do" (68), "The human mind is the mind that writes what any human mind years after or years before can read, thousands of years or no years it makes no difference" (108). The human mind, for Stein, functions outside of time and the regular events of human nature. But what the human mind thinks about - what it takes as subject or topic - is, precisely, human nature.

I bring up this later work of Stein's, if only briefly, because *White Wines* offers a way to think about the necessary and fraught relations between writing (or other acts of composition) and domesticity. If one traditional view of the poet's vocation involves a heroic, masculinist isolation that requires feminine support but disavows such dependence, Stein's play is post-Romantic: she avows and takes seriously as a topic the complex domesticity that lets her engage in writing in the first place. In this reading, Stein depicts the necessary place of others for the writer: sexual partners, friends, family members, intellectual compadres, anyone who may come into one's home and life. Stein famously asserted, over and over again, that "I write for myself and strangers," and yet her plays acknowledge how much she depended on the people she knew. Early in her career she wrote with her brother Leo in mind, later for Alice Toklas (who was almost always her first reader and typed her manuscripts), as well as for friends, acquaintances, and portrait subjects. In *White Wines* Stein explores the nature of her relations of dependence and independence, and in other plays she depicts the groups with whom she lived and wrote.

In other words, plays themselves contained or accommodated the difficult dynamics that Stein was concerned with. Richard Bridgman has noted about Stein's writing at this transitional time that it is "marked by a vocabulary of containers, colors, food, and light."⁵ The word "container" does show up in this play at the end of Act One ("make a best container with no speed"), another container appears at the end of the play ("all the old clothes are in the best bag"), and the title of the play *White Wines* names something that must be contained in order for it to be used or enjoyed. The idea of containing that has guided my thinking on Stein's plays comes from the work of Wilfred Bion who took up and elaborated Melanie Klein's notion of projective identification. Klein defined projective identification as an unconscious phantasy (a defense) in which unwanted parts of the self are aggressively projected outward and located elsewhere, inside someone else. (It is a more visceral concept than Freud's idea of projection.) In the 1950s several analysts in the Kleinian group explored this idea in their work with schizophrenic patients. In his essay "Attacks on Linking" Bion suggested that part of the analyst's role was to serve as a container for the patients' projections, to modify them so that they can be reintrojected by the patient in a more acceptable form. In his book *Learning from Experience* (1962) Bion moves from his experiences in the clinic to unfold a more general theory of thinking that is rooted in the constant to-and-fro of projection and introjection in the infant-mother dyad. He considers the experience of "reverie" to be particularly significant: "reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any 'objects' from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad."⁶ Under

some conditions, the infant can develop what Bion calls an apparatus for thinking: it takes in the capacity to contain and modify what might otherwise be projected outward.

In later work Bion elaborates his theory of container-contained as a relation, not only between mother and infant or analyst and analysand, but also between group and individual, thinker and thought, word and idea. It is significant, for Bion, that the container-contained relation is fundamentally reciprocal or reversible: a group may contain an individual, but so might an individual contain a group. Similarly, a word may contain a meaning, but so may a meaning (such as a dream, a feeling, a perception) contain words. Bion considers this reversibility to be crucial for the possibility of change and development in thinking. Change, for Bion, involves an unsettling of relations between container and contained, "a destructuring of the theories and a re-establishing of new conjunctions," as Robert Hinshelwood puts it. Hinshelwood goes on to explain that, in Bion's understanding, this destructuring or fragmentation involves "severe emotional demands" since "change involves a potential catastrophe": the structure of the thinking apparatus can fall apart to be reconfigured anew.

It is this reversibility of relation between container and contained that strikes me as most useful for thinking about theater and domesticity. On the one hand, of course, theater contains domesticity: it is astonishing how often plays takes marriage, family, and the household as theme, setting, or obsession. (Sidenote, I am currently teaching a seminar on modernist theatricality in which every play centers on some domestic issue or problem, from Ibsen and Chekhov to Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett). At the same time, domesticity contains theatricality: not only must marriage be witnessed by others outside the couple, as I mentioned earlier, but members of a household are alternately actors and

spectators to the actions and events taking place within it. That the stage can be a household, and a household a stage, is an index to the possibility of catastrophic change that can take place in both theater and domesticity alike, precisely as a function of their reversibility. Stein's *White Wines* addresses this kind of catastrophic change as a necessary part of development. Its last line puts it this way: "This is not a claim it is a reorganization and a balance and a return." More generally, I'll suggest here, Stein's theater proposes the play form itself as a reversible container for exploring domesticity and its everyday catastrophes.

¹ Instead, she sent Evans the three manuscripts that would comprise *Tender Buttons* (first published in June 1914). For information and documentation about this back-and-forth between Stein and various supporters, see *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl van Vechten: Volume 1 1913-1935* (Columbia University Press, 1986), 16, 20-21, 23. Edited by Edward Burns.

² *White Wines* is not included in Appendix C, "Chronological List of Productions," in Betsy Alayne Ryan's *Gertrude Stein's Theatre of the Absolute* (UMI Research Press, 1984). My research has so far shown a reference to a dramatic reading of the play directed by Lorna J. Smedman (see "'Cousin to Cooming': relation, Difference, and Racialized Language in Stein's Nonrepresentational Texts," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, 3 (1996): 569-588), and a reference to Drew Pissarra's production at St. Marks in New York in July 2010 (<http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/White-Wine-and-PostModernism>). There will be a Radio Free Stein performance of *White Wines* and *He Said It* in Vancouver in June 2016.

³ Jane Palatini Bowers, *"They Watch Me as They Watch This": Gertrude Stein's Metadrama* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 8-10.

⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, 1985), 119.

⁵ Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 137.

⁶ Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (Karnac, 1984), 36.