

# The Difference Sound Makes: Gertrude Stein and the Poetics of Intonation

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“**I** THINK IT SAFE TO SAY that most well-read people in the English-speaking world have not read *The Making of Americans*” (*Two Lives* 111). This rather droll observation by Janet Malcolm might well be an understatement. It’s probably safe to say that most English professors, perhaps even the majority of American literature professors, have not read *The Making of Americans*. But does that mean, as Malcolm concludes, that despite its status as a Modernist masterpiece, *The Making of Americans* is “more a monument than a text, a heroic achievement of writing, a near-impossible feat of reading” (111)? That very much depends on what you mean by reading.

To pass the time when my wife Glenys was pregnant with our son Euan we decided to read books out loud. We only ever read the one book, but it was a doozy. We chose *The Making of Americans*. Here was a text that on the page cannot but seem preposterous to most readers—a 925-page “novel” with no conventional plot or characterization—that comes effortlessly to life as sound and song in performance. *The Making of Americans* proved so accessible as sound that this “near-impossible feat of reading” turned into a happy family ritual that we sustained for several months and continued after Euan was born, a few pages almost every day, bigger

chunks on the weekend. We used a fancy silver bookmark with a bright red tassel to mark our place.

Now, either we are an unusually obstinate family or one of the most formidable texts in the American literary canon is also one of the most accessible. I have better proof for the latter claim, so that's the one I will pursue. It would seem that the case with *The Making of Americans* is as Eric Severeid puts it: "In written form her words seem bizarre and difficult to follow, but when she herself reads them aloud it is all perfectly lucid, natural, and exact" (quoted in Malcolm 103). But how can something that on the page seems ludicrous suddenly become lucid when experienced as sound rather than as text? How can the same words play host to such different effects?

Perhaps, as suggested in the work of Paul Zumthor, the words on the page and the sounded words of a speaking voice are not really the same words at all. "Half a century after the death of Dante," Zumthor writes, "*The Divine Comedy*, which was intended to be read, was on the lips of the ordinary people of Florence, who sang its terzine as they walked along the streets. Was it the same work? Of course not." For Zumthor, voice and text are two sides of an ontological schism. The materiality and the duration and social resonance of sounded words create an entirely different context for language. He continues,

Written works have their own values, on which European and American critics have concentrated.... But the voice brings to the fore other values, which in the course of a performance become part of the meaning of the text that is being transmitted. They enrich it and transform it, sometimes making it mean what it does not say. For the voice is more than speech. Its function is greater than that of conveying language ... and the physical existence of the voice hits us with a force of a material object. The voice is a thing. (7–8)

What would it mean, then, to bring an oral perspective into the critical conversation about literature, to presuppose voice rather than just text as a backdrop against which meaning emerges? As counterintuitive as it seems, that is precisely the method a text like *The Making of Americans* warrants and rewards. But it involves returning to a discussion long thought of as closed and runs the risk of seeming to fall into the critical vice Derrida named phonocentrism. In what would become a well-known pillar of the poststructuralist creed, Derrida collapses the distinction between speech and writing by showing how both modalities are always already prey to the difference and deference (*différence*) that infuses signification. Attempts

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to posit in speech a form of presence to which writing stands as the mere inscription or supplement posit an erroneous understanding of the *phone* as ontologically prior to the grapheme. At the same time, however, by substituting for phonocentrism the non-concept of *différance*, Derrida obscures a distinction between written and spoken language that a discussion of poetics cannot do without. Poststructuralism's demonstration of the difference writing makes must therefore be set in relation to the difference sound makes. This essay shows how Stein's work discloses a different difference than the one typically thought to structure meaning in language, a difference that registers aurally as intonation.

The better part of Stein's work is, and is about, the meaningfulness of its sound.

Always repeating is all of living, everything that is being is always repeating, more and more listening to repeating gives to me completed understanding. Each one then slowly comes to be a whole one to me, each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me, slowly it sounds louder and louder and louder inside me through my ears and eyes and feelings and the talking there is always in me, the repeating that is the whole of each one I come to know around, and each one of them then comes to be a whole one to me, comes to be a whole one in me. Loving repeating is one way of being. This is now a description of such being.

Always from the beginning there was to me all living as repeating. This was not then in me a conscious being. Always more and more this is in me developing to a completed being. This is now again a little description of such a being.

In their beginning as children every one has in them loving repeating being. This is for them then their natural being. Later in conscious being some have much in them of loving repeating being, some have in them almost nothing of such feeling. There are then these two kinds of them. This is then one way of thinking of them. (*Making* 300)

For Stein, repeating is the basis for an aurally-constituted ontology and epistemology. To repeat is to be, and to listen to repeating is to come to know and understand, to gain a "completed understanding."

Stein's interest in the sound of voices as source material for poetry peaks as she is beginning work on *The Making of Americans*.

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could listen to it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movements of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different. (“Gradual” 86)

Here Stein makes a curious but crucial distinction. It is not the “actual words” that people use that makes their speech interesting and meaningful but rather the way they deploy their words in rhythmical sequences, the rise and fall of their intonation.

And here also lies Stein’s real secret. She structures meaning textually in the mode of speech by foregrounding intonation. The goal is to disclose spatially in literature the kind of meaning that unfolds socially over time in life. This proved to be a great test for her as a writer and the source of enormous anguish as she wrote *The Making of Americans*. As she narrates in “The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*,”

While I was listening and hearing and feeling the rhythm of each human being I gradually began to feel the difficulty of putting it down. Types of people I could put down but a whole human being felt at one and the same time, in other words while in the act of feeling that person was very difficult to put into words.... When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of a personality that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time. Now that may never have been a trouble to you but it was a terrible trouble to me. And a great deal of *The Making of Americans* was a struggle to do this thing, to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out, but it was a whole there then within me and as such it had to be said. (89, 91)

This passage and others like it reflect Stein’s struggle with the limitations of her medium, phonetic writing, and its inability to notate, except in the most basic way, rhythm and intonation. Indeed, the miracle of phonetic literacy as a medium is precisely its ability to reduce language to a set of basic sounds inscribed spatially as letters, to eliminate, that

is, the complex nuances of language as sounded in speech. Stein, in an effort to cast print radically against type, as it were, tries to retrofit the alphabet with those features it must renounce: voice, body, context. Stein's dogged determination to actualize her time-sense of people in writing's spatial form goes on for hundreds of pages, of course, and her anguish is as much a part of the work as is her triumphalism. She writes in the Martha Hersland section:

I am all unhappy in this writing. I know very much of the meaning of the being in men and women. I know it and feel it and I am always learning more of it and now I am telling it and I am nervous driving and unhappy in it. Sometimes I will be all happy in it. (*Making* 348)

It is tempting to see Stein's struggles as evidence of failure, as Malcolm does when she reads the following passage as a symptom of "magisterial disorder":

I mean, I mean and that is not what I mean, I mean that not any one is saying what they are meaning, I mean that I am feeling something, I mean that I mean something and I mean that not any one is thinking, is feeling, is saying, is certain of that thing, I mean that not any one can be saying, thinking, feeling, not any one can be certain of that thing, I mean I am not certain of that thing, I am not ever saying, thinking, feeling, being certain of this thing, I mean, I mean, I know what I mean. (quoted in *Two Lives* 134)

Malcolm's interpretation might seem plausible enough on a silent reading of the passage, but a very different impression of its coherence emerges when the passage is read out loud. Accessed aurally, the passage is a coherent, even compelling, statement, punctuated by very strong emphasis and a driving, emphatic rhythm. The passage remains coherent regardless of whether we hear in its intonational contours an expression of rage at the speaker's own frustrated relationship to language, a declaration of conviction in what she knows, or, more plausibly, the emphatic cadence of one who is both certain and uncertain at the same time. The one thing it is not, though, is disordered. Indeed, Malcolm's (mis)reading of the passage confirms Stein's thesis that it is not so much the "actual words" that determine the meaning as it is the rise and fall of intonation. The meaning of the passage depends on how we hear it.

A fundamental and obvious difference between spoken and written language is that one can be heard as sound and the other can't. What we

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can hear in spoken language but cannot see in writing is intonation. How meaningful is intonation? Intonation alone (pitch, stress, and duration) can tell us whether two people are kidding or quarreling on the other side of a wall, even though we can't make out any of the words they are saying. Intonation is what allows the word "Hello" to mean everything from "Greetings" to "Anyone home?" to "You don't have to yell. I'm right here!" Consider too the gulf in meaning that is opened by the lack of intonation in email discourse and the volatility that ensues when interlocutors waver between the semantic and intonational significance of the words. When it comes to rendering meaning dynamic, intonation makes troping look cumbersome. What poet wouldn't want intonation on her side?

The only problem is that, technically, there is no such thing as intonation in phonetic writing. Phonetic writing notates only the basic vowel and consonant sounds of the phonemes (segments). Their pitch, stress, and duration (suprasegmentals) are—aside from the ham-fisted renderings of stress and pitch provided by punctuation and other diacritical marks—invisible on the page or screen. This is the main reason why prosody, the study of the complete sound form of poetry, is so often reduced to an analysis of segments, that is, metrics.

Certainly, the very pinched sense of prosody given in metrics leaves little to say about the many variations of free verse and tells us almost nothing about the role of sound in Stein's work. To bring something more than just the tin ear of metrics to the study of sound in poetry therefore requires critical ingenuity. Something has to compensate for the deficiencies of textuality as a vehicle for notating sound. Something has to supply the suprasegmental/intonational dimension of the auditory experience.

That something is usually understood to be the auditory imagination of the reader, activated through memory. "[A]s a practice of writing, [lyric] has no sound," Susan Stewart observes; therefore, "we are always *recalling* sound with only some regard to an originating auditory experience" (29). T. V. F. Brogan emphasizes this same belatedness: "During the cognitive processing of the text in reading, what was, in the past, a present moment is retrieved and re-enacted" (987). Lurking herein is a substantial revision of the ontological status of sound in the poem. Stewart goes on to say: "The sounds of a poem are not heard within the room of the poem, but they are heard within a memory of hearing that is the total auditory experience of the listener in response to what knowledge of the poem is extant at a given moment" (33).

When we consider that no actual sound issues from the text as text and that text itself is a singularly impoverished medium for representing

the sound of language, then any expanded prosodic analysis has to invoke a secondary function such as auditory imagination as a supplement. But this approach presupposes a reader interfacing with the text in silence. Why relegate sound to the status of belated memory of “an originating auditory experience”? Why not use an actual auditory experience—voice, either of the reader or the taped voice of the author—to account for sound? An actual voice has much to recommend it over the auditory imagination, for it is a material thing: “[I]ts qualities can be described and measured,” as Zumthor reminds us.

Factoring the material voice into literary reading would also amount to a significant and, in disciplinary terms, radical revision of the ontological status of the poem. But it is a step that Stein’s work demands. One of Stein’s unique contributions to poetics was to simply not be bothered by the factual belatedness of sound as a condition of textuality. As she was wont to say over and over again in her lectures, the literal condition of possibility for meaning both in the world and in most of her work is intonation or, as she called it, “insistence.” Indeed, as the following passage will make clear, there is really no other way to understand her decision to use the same words so many times in given paragraphs if not to engage the differences that would distinguish them from one another as vocalized sound.

Family living can go on existing. Very many are remembering this thing are remembering that family living can go on existing. Very many are quite certain that family living can go on existing. Very many are remembering [*sic*] that they are quite certain that family living can go on existing.

Any family living going on existing is going on and every one can come to be a dead one and there are then not any more living in that family living and that family is not then existing if there are not then any more having come to be living. Any family living is existing if there are some more being living when very many have come to be dead ones. Family living can be existing if not every one in the family living has come to be a dead one. Family living can be existing if there have come to be some existing who have not come to be dead ones. Family living can be existing and there can be some who are not completely remembering any such thing. Family living can be existing and there can be some who have been completely remembering such a thing. Family living can be existing and there can be some remembering something of such a thing. Family living can be existing and some can come

to be old ones and then dead ones and some can have been then quite expecting some such thing. Family living can be existing and some can come to be old ones and not yet dead ones and some can be remembering something of some such thing. Family living can be existing and some one can come to be an old one and some can come to be a pretty old one and some can come to be completely expecting such a thing and completely remembering expecting such a thing. Family living can be existing and everyone one can come to be a dead one and not any one then is remembering any such thing. Family living can be existing and everyone can come to be a dead one and some are remembering some such thing. Family living can be existing and any one can come to be a dead one and every one is then a dead one and there are then not any more being living. Any old one can come to be a dead one. Every old one can come to be a dead one. Any family being existing is one having some being then not having come to be a dead one. Any family living can be existing when not every one has come to be a dead one. Every one in a family living having come to be dead ones some are remembering something of some such thing. Some being living not having come to be dead ones can be ones being in a family living. Some being living and having come to be old ones can come then to be dead ones. Some being living and being in a family living and coming then to be old ones can come then to be dead ones. Any one can be certain that some can remember such a thing. Any family living can be one being existing and some can remember something of some such thing. (*Making* 925)

To read this passage on the page is to experience something preposterously redundant. It is 555 words long but consists of a mere forty-five different words. Its lexical density (number of different words / total number of words times 100) comes in at a mere 8.1 percent (40 to 50 percent is considered low). A same sized chunk of text from the beginning of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* consists of 289 different words for a lexical density of 52 percent. Virtually all of the repeated words in James's text take the form of articles, auxiliary verbs, and pronouns. Stein, on the other hand, repeats the most substantive words in her diction: "family," "living," "existing," "remembering," "dead," "completely."

As discourse, the passage is a near total disaster because the denotative content is absurdly basic. A very loose paraphrase might look like this:

Family life goes on. Family members can die. When one family member dies, they are no longer living in the family. So long as all the members haven't died, the family is still alive. Some remember this. Some forget. People age. The old ones sometimes die, and when they die they stop remembering the family. Any old person can die. A living family can consist of one member.

What could be the point of such a text? To subject a radically truncated diction to a process of insistent repetition is to isolate intonation in much the same way we isolate intonation in speech. In everyday speech we use intonation to add meaning and emphasis to an impoverished diction, and in everyday speech intonation tends to be the better part of meaning. The only difference, and it's not a small one, is that Stein has no interest in imitating the rhythms of speech. "What you say has nothing to do with what you write," she points out (quoted in *The Poetics of Impasse* 79). Her fidelity to the participial form of the verb, the sheer degree of repetitiveness, and the non-idiomatic syntax ensures that her words will not be mistaken for dialogue. Her method is a perversion of speech. It takes a basic fact about speech—that people tend to repeat themselves a lot—and pushes it as far as it can go.

Now, if you will, listen to Stein reading the same passage, from a recording in New York, Winter 1934–35 (CD track 1).

With so few words and so much repetition, most of what we experience is sonic in nature: we feel a syncopated rhythm (the semi-regular beat exhibited by the words) and hear intonation (the subtle differences in pitch, stress, and duration). The passage is so thin lexically that it hardly engenders a linguistic response at all. Instead, we respond as we would to music, registering rhythmical and intonational patterns and forming expectations based on recurrence. In the end, Stein's method is simple: she attempts to short circuit the semantic dimension of language in order to activate intonation.

There's a clear analytic to be observed behind this method. The two types of sound in language—segmental (the sound of phonemes) and suprasegmental (the pitch, stress, and duration with which phonemes are sounded)—correspond to two types of meaning: one determined by signification in the Saussurean sense and the other determined by intonation. Signification arises out of what we might call heteromorphological difference, or the difference between one signifier and all the rest. Intonation, by contrast, is the result of homomorphological difference, or the difference between different soundings of the same signifiers. For example, the phrase

Sound, as a  
material,  
temporal  
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an event—is the  
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“good evening” signifies linguistically via heteromorphological difference, the basic difference that distinguishes the sound segments of those signifiers from all other possible signifiers. But when the phrase “good evening” is spoken, intonation enters the mix and an entirely different species of meaning emerges, a form of signification based on homomorphological difference. This type of meaning routinely overwrites referential and denotative meaning, that is, the semantic meaning of the words. A terse “good evening” might mean “you’re late,” a jovial “good evening” might mean “I’m so happy to see you,” whereas a too-jovial uttering of the words might veer us in the opposite direction.

The ostensible banality of everyday prattle is for Stein a deep reservoir of music and meaning, so much so that she sought to isolate it and refine it into a curious literary method: a writing that presupposed the dynamics of speech sounds as its condition of possibility. That we tend to access literature as writing can throw us off, the spatial coordinates of the page defining by default the totality of the reading experience. Sound, as a material, temporal phenomenon—an event—is the first casualty of a critical poetics defined with only the text in mind, as in the following, otherwise excellent, definition of poetry in which a brief acknowledgement of poetry’s temporal dimension is very soon swamped in a flood of spatial metaphors.

Poetry is language in which every component element—word and word order, sound and pause, image and echo—is significant, significant in that every element points toward or stands for further relationships among and beyond themselves. Poetry is language that always means more. Its elements are figures, and poetry itself is a language of figures, in which each component can potentially open toward new meanings, levels, dimensions, connections, or resonances. Poetry does this through its careful, intricate pattern of words. It offers language as highly organized as language can be. It is language so highly patterned that there is, ideally, a reason or purpose (or rather, many) for each and every word put into a poem. No word is idle or accidental. Each word has a specific place within an overarching pattern. Together they create meaningful and beautiful designs. (Wolosky 3)

*The Making of Americans* is as single-minded an example as can be found of a poetics that strives to bring the temporality of sound into the space of the text, to present literature not just as an inscription but also as an event.

## Works Cited

Audio tracks cited in this article are available on the compact disc accompanying the print version of this special issue. Some of the audio tracks cited in this article may also be available at [www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc) under the “Extras” tab.

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