



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2014

Aesthetics of Theory in the Modern Era and Beyond /
Photographie documentaire

The Tune of Thinking: Gertrude Stein's *Narration*

Abigail Lang



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7047>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.7047

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFA)

Electronic reference

Abigail Lang, "The Tune of Thinking: Gertrude Stein's *Narration*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2014, Online since 06 March 2015, connection on 31 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7047> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.7047>

This text was automatically generated on 31 January 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The Tune of Thinking: Gertrude Stein's *Narration*

Abigail Lang

- 1 A radical understanding of modernist medium-specificity¹ would seem to account for Gertrude Stein's early contesting of traditional generic distinctions and the renaming of her medium as writing. Portraits, plays, operas, novels: Stein set out to reexamine each on her own terms and to engage in playful straddlings, for instance titling *Lucy Church Amiably* "a novel of romantic beauty and nature and which looks like an engraving". From the 1930s, while she doesn't abandon genres altogether, she increasingly conflates them or abandons them in favor of a meta-genre (or more properly a medium) she designates as writing, or sometimes meditation. *The Geographical History of America* is a good example of it. By embracing the generically-undifferentiated category of writing she also implicitly repudiates such distinctions as run between prose and poetry—properly prose and verse but Stein doesn't use the term verse—or theory and practice. Having renamed her medium writing, one remaining boundary is that between writing and talking.
- 2 Written out to be spoken to an audience, the four lectures that constitute *Narration* (1935) take up where the *Lectures in America* left off and intend to think out narrative in relation to knowledge and the possible merging of prose and poetry. These four lectures were written in haste, during her American lecture tour, only a few days before they were delivered² and may feel less accomplished and pithy than the *Lectures in America*. But although they were written with an audience in mind and indeed with the previous experience of lecturing, they often feel closer to Stein's usual "writing in thinking". That may be because they are less concerned with elucidating her own past writing for an audience than with thinking out her current "bother": "I often wonder how I am ever to come to know all that I am to know about narrative. Narrative is a problem to me. I worry a good deal about it these days and I will not write a lecture about it yet because I am still too worried about it." (Stein, 1998, 328) But when the university of Chicago invited her to give four more lectures she accepted and lectured her way through *Narration*, irresolute as she still was. In their very irresoluteness, the

Narration lectures provide insight into several other generic bothers that beset Stein, some conscious, others not: the current merging of prose and poetry; the compared merits of talking and writing; and the forms taken by theory and practice—all hinging on her central concern: narration.

- 3 Where the early modernist manifestos vied for attention with a bold typography embodying an often outrageous rhetoric, Stein uses other strategies to engage attention. Her rhetoric of emphasis and persistent approximation give rise to a heightened litany, a sustained oral prosody and bring out the pedagogical dimension of her insistence. Both are effects of her commitment to the process of thinking. Although somewhat inconclusive, the *Narration* lectures appear to be one of the rare modernist attempts (with Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous "The Storyteller") to rethink—rather than downplay it against collage or abstraction—narration in a discursive direction, thus paving the way for post-war modernism's embrace of orality as exemplified in John Cage's *Lectures* and David Antin's talk poems.

Theory and Practice

- 4 What counts as theoretical writing in Stein's works? With its textbook title echoing Pound's *ABC of Reading, How to Write* is an obvious candidate. There, through trial and error, by endlessly coining and evaluating sentences, Stein arrives at her theory of sentences and paragraphs, an important moment of her pursuit, but by no means the only one. In fact, in her lectures and particularly in "Portraits and Repetitions" she makes clear how each of her styles is a practical solution to a specific question, whether consciously³ addressed or not. The aesthetic qualities of the new style are presented as a by-product, they emerge from the writerly solutions she implements: "Melody should always be a by-product it should never be an end in itself."⁴ For instance, it is because she sought "present immediacy" in *The Making of Americans* that she "had to use present participles, new constructions of grammar." (Stein, 1975, 155) So that practice, as writing, comes first; practice discovers the theory. This is what Stein calls "thinking in writing" (*ibid.*, 51), and her portraits and plays are strewn with remarks which can be understood in a metapoetic way.

Secondary writing

- 5 Can a theory remain in practice or does it need to be articulated? Stein's stylistic evolution testifies to the fact that she did solve questions for herself, but would we be able to articulate her pursuit if she hadn't done so herself in her so-called secondary writing? No doubt, her project would have been harder to grasp and her reception further delayed. All her secondary writing was produced in the last twenty years of her life, starting with the two lectures delivered in Britain in 1926, continuing with the *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* published in 1932 and culminating with the lectures delivered during her immensely successful American tour of 1934-35. For the first time in writing, Stein was looking backwards: at her life in the *Autobiography* and at her writing in the *Lectures in America* which might be called an *ars poetica* in retrospect. In that sense, the lectures qualify as criticism since, as she quipped in her answer to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire in 1939: "Criticism is bound to come too late" (Stein, 1975, 55). In *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, Robert Haas explains why

Stein looked down on such writing: “Stein knew this was her ‘secondary’ writing, and because it earned money for her she said it mixed her up in her relationship to God and Mammon. The fact that it was done with an audience in mind made it “identity” writing.” (111) This suggests that what is wrong with secondary writing is precisely its “twoness”, the duality it imposes:

1. It comes after the writing proper: it is retrospective;
2. It requires Stein to divide herself between a past and a present self: it is reflexive;
3. It is addressed to an outside audience: it is expository.

- 6 In other words, it requires *critical distance*. While Stein concedes that retrospection is required for knowledge (“In order to know one must always go back”, she writes in “Plays”), she is always extremely wary of any form of duality, division or delay.
- 7 Stein had engaged in narrative from the very beginning of her writing life, but it was only gradually that narration became a theoretical issue or bother. In “A Transatlantic Interview 1946” she says:

After all, human beings are interested in two things. They are interested in the reality and interested in telling about it. I had struggled up to that time with the creation of reality, and then I became interested in how you could tell this thing in a way that anybody could understand and at the same time keep true to your values, and the thing bothered me a great deal at the time. (Stein, 1971, 18)

- 8 Like all modernists, Stein had shunned recreation or representation in favor of creation and presentation. More than any modernist, she was committed to immediacy, moment-to-moment composition, so that narration was bound to bother her, given its involvement with dual times or remembering and with intersubjectivity or communication.⁵ Indeed, unlike “poetry and even exposition”, she says, “narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in somebody else’s”. Like translation, narration is about *recreating* “the point of view of somebody else”, which accounts for the smoothness of the words, (Stein, 1971, 19). Still, before embarking on her U.S. lecture tour she told Thornton Wilder how, having “really written poetry”, “really written plays”, “really written thinking”, “really written sentences and paragraphs”, she “had not simply told anything and I wanted to do that thing must do it.” (Stein, 1937, 302) What brought narration even more acutely to the theoretical fore, perhaps, is the fame and consequent identity crisis occasioned by the success of *The Autobiography*, fully experienced during her American lecture tour, and later reflected upon in *Ida* and *The Geographical History of America*.

A crisis in narrative

- 9 At the beginning of the third lecture Stein posits a crisis of narrative: “It does happen it is bound to happen that the way of telling anything can come not to mean anything to the one telling that thing.” (Stein, 1935, 30) Three things, she says, are then possible: one can go on telling things in that meaningless way; one can stop telling altogether; or “one starts telling that thing in some other way that may or may not come to mean anything” (*ibid.*).⁶ The sure sign that a way of telling anything no longer means anything to the one telling that thing is that “no one is listening” including the one telling. (We will see how Stein reclaims the attention of her audience.) Narrative used to be “a progressive telling of things that were progressively happening”. “But now we have changed all that” (17), “there is at present not a sense of anything being successively happening, moving is in every direction / beginning & ending is not really

exciting" (19). And the new narrative must come to express "being existing", an "immediate existing" (20) because knowledge has no succession: "How do you know anything, well you know anything as complete knowledge as having it completely in you at the actual moment that you have it. That is what knowledge is, and essentially therefore knowledge is not succession but an immediate existing."⁷ (Stein, 1935, 20) If one remembers that narration and knowledge are cognates, one begins to realize that these lectures are both about the coming to know of what narration is and the imparting of the known which tends to take a narrative form when exposed to an outside, whether in literature, history, philosophy or the newspapers. So that while Stein is trying to think out narration for herself, *in practice* the question that confronts the *Narration* lectures is: how to convey what one knows? Enacting what they say, the lectures seek to bridge the discrepancy between the immediate nature of knowledge and the gradual nature of narrative.

Writing and Talking

Written Improvisation

- 10 They do that by keeping to the order of discovery, advancing by persistent approximation. The thinking and the writing are one, truly concomitant. The lecture is written as it is thought out, without plan or outline, without premeditation or intention, without reordering points in a linear, logical or systematic manner, shunning the narrative conventions of expository criticism. Instead
 - there is persistent approximation, rephrasing, fine-tuning, which correspond to her "moment-to-moment emphasizing" going back to *The Making of Americans*;
 - there is going forward and back: beginning again and again, announcing the next step and recapitulating the previous one, to make sure her audience is with her—a form of rumination;
 - there is moving in all direction: digressing, meandering, repetiting, coming back to a topic from a different viewpoint, branching off, leaving signposts for later
 - there are no explanations but a series of statements: "you cannot explain a whole thing because if it is a whole thing it does not need explaining, it merely needs stating" Stein had written in "What is English Literature". (Stein, 1998b, 216)
- 11 From the point of view of narratology, one could say Stein does entirely away with the story or plot. Her theoretical inquiry keeps strictly to the order of the telling. The commitment to the immediacy of thinking is so complete that Stein gives up the simple benefit of backward scanning that writing provides and refuses to revise even seemingly meaningless slips: "they did not want the words the settled words the known words to act in a particularly that is to move in a particular way and also in any kind of direction." (Stein, 1935, 13) When the initial structure breaks down, Stein proceeds, beginning again, rather than deleting the initial incomplete structure—making this an instance of written improvisation, paradoxical as this may sound. One may wonder why Stein who by all accounts was a garrulous talker and exceptional conversationalist didn't just improvise the lectures. She says why obliquely in the fourth lecture mostly devoted to the question of audience and recognition: "Writing was writing if it was being written and in it even if I was talking I was not talking as I was writing" (48). The difference between writing and talking, even a writing of an improvisatory nature, is

that writing enables *recognition*—another cognate of knowledge and narration—which is how Stein comes to reword the issue of audience. “When you write this is of course recognition there is the recognition that you recognize what you write as you write [while] as you talk you do not recognize what you talk as you talk.” (53-4) In order for writing to be literature, the thing written must have no existence before the writing. Writers “try to make a thing a thing that they recognize while they are writing make it something that had no existing before that writing gave it recognition” (62). Which is why history mostly can't be literature, as the “thing” exists before it is written. And the same is true of anything that has been plotted or premeditated.

Discourse and discursiveness

12

Unsurprisingly, Stein's lectures are anti-discursive if discursive is taken in its second sense: “passing from premisses to conclusions; proceeding by reasoning or argument; ratiocinative. Often opposed to intuitive.” (OED) Proceeding by reasoning or ratiocinating is something of an equivalent of traditional narrative in the domain of thinking or theory: “a form of succession in (mental, intellectual) happening”. “The discursive faculty essentially compares” says W. Hamilton in one of the examples given by the OED and comparison, like resemblance, because it introduces remembering, introduces confusion, two times running at once. Stein favours intuition or insight, sudden and immediate vision, forms of knowing more generally associated with poetry. Arguing is not interesting she writes in *Everybody's Autobiography* “because after all what is said is not meant and what is meant is not said in arguing” (292). More generally, Stein doesn't think much of understanding and intelligence. In “Portraits and Repetition” she expresses her low opinion of “so-called intelligent people” who “mix up remembering with talking and listening, and as a result [...] have theories about anything” (Stein, 1998b, 296), adding in *Everybody's Autobiography*: “I did not care for any one being intelligent because if they are intelligent they talk as if they were preparing to change something.” (75) Now that is something that Stein is definitely not interested in, unlike so many of her fellow modernists prone to diagnosis and prescriptions and programmes. The idea that change could be brought about by pronouncements or actions is entirely foreign to her, change being the foremost reality of a world in constant flux. When she is prospective, as in *Narration*, she concludes her hypotheses with “perhaps yes perhaps no”. Knowing is all about asking questions,⁸ not giving answers.

- 13 The first sense of *discursive*, however, is “running hither and thither, digressive” and in that sense Stein is extremely and essentially discursive, committed to the solicitation of the moment and the object rather than to any outline or audience. But there is more. It seems the implicit conclusion that Stein reaches at the end of *Narration* as well as what she enacts in these lectures is *discourse*. The future she foresees for narration might well be the replacement of narrative by discourse in the sense that Émile Benveniste gave to these terms. In his 1959 essay “Les relations de temps dans le verbe français”, Benveniste distinguishes two “planes” of enunciation: history and discourse. History or *récit* (narrative) tells of past events. It is the narrative typically made by a historian telling of events with no bearing on the narrator's situation. Only the third person pronoun is used, never *I* or *you*; and the tense used is the aorist (the more distant form of the preterit used for an action pure and simple with no more present

relevance). Actually, Benveniste concludes, there barely is a narrator, the events seem so speak for themselves. Discourse on the contrary supposes a speaker and an audience one wishes to act upon; it is always a form of address. It uses all pronouns including *I* and *you* and all tenses with a preference for the present perfect. All oral speeches are discourse but many written texts too such as correspondences, memoirs, plays and didactic treatises. Stein's lectures obviously pertain to the order of discourse, but so does the future of narration; she proposes to demote the time of the events told and to promote the time of the telling. And clearly, part of the postwar Steinian legacy will reintroduce narrative in theory and poetry, a narrative of a strikingly discursive type, not only digressive but actually oral, as represented by John Cage's lectures and David Antin's talks. While Stein herself remained wary of talk, denying it any literary value, her written talks and the oral, improvisatory, dimension of part of her writings paved the way for the exploration of what Antin calls the "language arts" which include both writing and talking and challenge the distinction between "writing proper" and secondary writing.

The Aesthetics of Theory

- 14 Take the rhyme scheme, meter, imagery away from a sonnet and not much is left. Poetry looses all in paraphrase. The same holds true for most of Stein's work, but her lectures can be summarized or reworded in a more conventional manner. What is the value of their aesthetic dimension then?

The Tune of Thinking

- 15 First, the aesthetic dimension attracts and sustains attention. The tune of thinking provides a tuning in. Like her fellow modernists, Stein had a clear conscience she was competing with mass-entertainment: "no one is listening" (N, 30). Where some of the early modernist manifestos vied for attention with bold typography, outrageous rhetoric and polemic excess, Stein engages attention through her rhetoric of emphasis and heightened litany, a sustained oral prosody. There is throughout *Narration* a strident sense of urgency in the address which culminates in the fourth lecture where she exclaims: "And all this has so much to do with writing a narrative of anything that I can almost cry about it." (51) This outburst of pathos conveys the intensity of her endeavor.
- 16 While she is thinking out narrative for herself, she always remains conscious of her audience which is noteworthy considering Stein's radical distrust of communication, stated in the lectures themselves: "One cannot of course go on forgetting that any one that is it is a natural thing that no one really not any one knows what any one means by what they that is that one is saying" (N, 55). Still her rhetoric of persuasion and the recurrent use of phatic markers manifest her exertion to make herself understood: "Think about it if you think about it if you watch as I have watched (9); "Do you see what I mean." (37) By taking her audience step by step, by constantly recapitulating and rephrasing, she gives a pedagogical dimension to her use of insistence: repetition becomes emphasis, alternative ways of conveying an idea, from a different angle. Most of all, her use of the pronoun "we" indicates her hope or desire to be understood: "Let us think", "But before we begin", "There we are", "And so now we have gotten her",

and most tellingly almost at the end: “we are all beginning to know at the same time” (55) which could be read as the index of successful lecturing: simultaneity in elucidation, synchronized understanding. So that the rhythm of the lectures ultimately aims at fostering a unison of thinking—thus solving the bother of plays, syncopated time, the disjunction between the emotional time of an audience and the emotional time of the play which had caused Stein endless trouble and made people nervous at the theatre, she said. Nervousness consists in needing to go faster or slower so as to get together, to tune in or walk in step. Janet Hobhouse’s account of the lectures would seem to corroborate this: “Linked together in a hard effort of understanding, Gertrude and the audience were sometimes moving as one. [...] In the lecture halls where she spoke, a strange intimacy was created as the audience was taken up and held in the rhythms of her thinking.” (165-166) So while the writing as thinking is an attempt to solve the trouble with knowing (the discrepancy or duality created by reflexivity or critical distance—when one is two), the tune of thinking is an attempt to solve the trouble with communication, that two can never be one.

Prose and Thought

- 17 The aesthetic dimension of the lectures has at least a second important role: it is performative or exemplary, it enacts what the lecture contemplates, the coming together of prose and poetry. The lectures are laid out as prose and have the discursiveness we associate with prose but they are strongly rhythmic, “weaving extended yet simply constructed sentences with frequent repetitions and variations that rhythmically draw the listener in [...] rhythms that impress themselves on the mind”, writes Ulla Dydo (627), while David Antin evokes Stein’s “poetry of incantations and litanies”, calling it an elegant prosody in the traditional sense. Though rhythm is more commonly associated with verse, rhythmic prose has a long history, extending from the end of the Roman Empire to the middle ages under the name *cursus*, a term meaning to run or flow and the ancestor of the word “discourse”. Paul Zumthor explains that the *cursus* was a quasi-musical use of non-metrical language, the idea being that the movement of the voice is shaped by the movement of thought and shapes it in turn.⁹ He quotes Conrad de Mure who writes in 1275 that “the producer of the text turns and turns the message from heart and mouth” (192). The *cursus* disappeared for good in the XIVth century, replaced by Ciceronian eloquence more akin to the Renaissance spirit. One noted figure was the *homoiteleuton* in which syntactical groups end in identical sounds, a trope omnipresent in Stein’s texts which ply and multiply gerunds. More generally, Zumthor’s description of the *cursus* provides an accurate and inspiring description of Stein’s lectures, Stein who in the *Autobiography* recalls “liking to set a sentence for herself as a sort of tuning fork and metronome and then write to that time and tune.” (1998a, 802)
- 18 In the second lecture, Stein furthers the question of prose and poetry which she had started elucidating in “Poetry and Grammar”: will they go on existing separately? To sort out their future she begins by looking at their origin: “In the beginning there really was no difference between poetry and prose”. The time of the Old Testament was a time of primordial immediacy and unity: “they told what they were and they felt what they saw and they knew how they knew and everything they had to say came as it had to come to do what it had to do.” (N, 27) Slowly, duality appears in the form of

doubt, self-consciousness, reflexivity and memory, bringing about interpretation and giving rise to rhetoric, to science and to philosophy which “require” prose.

And then slowly they came to know that what they knew might mean something different from what they had known it was when they knew simply knew what it was. [...] they began to feel what they said when they said anything when they knew anything and this made them then think about how they said anything how they knew anything and in telling this thing telling how they knew anything how they said anything prose began, and so then there was prose and poetry. (N, 27)

- 19 Prose increasingly specialized in narration and epistemology while poetry tried to retain direct intuition and vision but gradually lost this mode of direct knowledge and had to be content with naming; presumably a form of rhetoric.

Prose and poetry then went on and more and more as it went on prose was [...] telling how anything happened [...] how anything was known [...] and poetry poetry tried to remain with knowing anything and knowing its name, gradually it came to really not knowing but really only knowing its name and that is at last what poetry became. (N, 28)

- 20 Moving on to the present situation, Stein claims that now “nobody can be certain that narrative is existing that poetry and prose have different meanings.” (N, 28) So that for Stein, literature is back to an Old Testament situation, before the separation of prose from poetry, before Plato banished poetry from the Republic and the domain of knowledge. Implicit in the fact that she doesn't lament the gradual shrivelling of the domain of poetry to naming without knowing, is the anticipation that with the dissolution of prose and poetry in the larger category of writing, knowing, naming and telling will be able to interact in new fertile ways. In her own way, Stein participates in the reclaiming of the domain of thought for poetry, a movement initiated with Romanticism and which, as David Antin has shown¹⁰, casts the contention and redefinition of genres in a wider frame, that of the legitimate domain of poetry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WORKS CITED

- ANTIN, David, “Some Questions about Modernism” (1974), http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Antin-David_Some-Q-Modernism.html (last accessed on December 15th, 2013).
- BENVENISTE, Émile, *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Tel, 1966.
- BURNS, Edward, Ulla E. Dydo, With contributions by William Rice, *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*, Yale University Press, 1996.
- DYDO, Ulla with William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises, 1923-34*, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2003.
- HOBHOUSE, Janet, *Everybody Who Was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein*, New York, Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1975, 165-6.
- STEIN, Gertrude, *Narration*, Chicago University Of Chicago Press, 2010 [1935].

STEIN, Gertrude, *Everybody's Autobiography*, New York, Random House, 1937.

STEIN, Gertrude, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas, Los Angeles, Black Sparrow, 1971.

STEIN, Gertrude, *How Writing is Written*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas, Los Angeles, Black Sparrow, 1975.

STEIN, Gertrude, *Writings 1903-1932*, New York, Library of America, 1998a.

STEIN, Gertrude, *Writings 1932-1946*, New York, Library of America, 1998b.

ZUMTHOR, Paul, *La Lettre et la voix. De la « littérature » médiévale*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Poétique, 1987.

NOTES

1. The term "medium specificity" was popularized by Clement Greenberg in the forties. Greenberg argued that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincides with all that is unique in the nature of its medium. The concept can be traced back to Lessing's 1766 essay "Laocoon". A modern art enthusiast, Stein was well aware that, as Maurice Denis had declared in 1890: "A painting before being a warhorse, a naked woman, or some anecdote or other, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours in a particular arrangement".
2. According to William Rice's chronology, they were composed between February 25th and March 9th, 1935 and delivered on March 1st, 6th, 8th and 13th 1935. (Burns, 1996, 347-8)
3. "I didn't know what I was doing any more than you know, but in response to the need of my period I was doing this thing. That is why I came in contact with people who were unconsciously doing the same thing." (Stein, 1975, 153)
4. In "Portraits and Repetitions", like a Puritan making a public confession, Stein tells how at one point she had given in to the temptation of "the beauty of the sounds as they came from me" and had relinquished "the strict discipline that I had given myself, the absolute refusal of never using a word that was not an exact word". When she realized how drunk she had become she decided she must be sober again: "It is so much more exciting to be sober, to be exact and concentrated and sober." (Stein, 1998b, 309). Arguably, Stein didn't so much give up music as move on from the jingle of paronomasia to a rhythm grounded in syntax: the tune of thinking.
5. "Nobody enters into the mind of someone else, not even a husband and wife [...] Why should you?" (Stein, 1971, 18)
6. And she warns that this third choice is not experimenting because "telling something is not an experiment it is a thing that has to be done since any one since every one inevitably has to tell something and has to tell something in the way that makes it feel that that something is what that thing is. (Stein, 1935, 30-1)
7. Knowledge is central to Stein who begins *Lectures in America* with the following statement: "One cannot come back too often to the question what is knowledge and to the answer knoweldge is what one knows." (1998b, 195) This is echoed in the opening words of the second *Narration* lecture: "Knowledge is what you know and there is nothing more difficult to say than that that knowledge is what you know." (16)
8. "And in asking a question one is not answering but one is as one may say deciding about knowing. Knowing is what you know and in asking these questions although there is no one who answers these questions there is in them that there is knoweldge." (Stein, 1998b, 250)

9. At the end of the fourth lecture, Stein is obviously struggling through the question of audience. The rhythm becomes choppy, the sentences harder to parse but they never break down altogether and actually drag the thinking along.

10. In his 1974 article, David Antin suggests that what played itself out in early Modernism as questions of genre or medium involved, more fundamentally, a question of domain, of legitimate domain for poetry which went back to Romanticism: "I think it is clear that the relation of poetry to truth, which is a question of domain, not of medium, haunts all great Romantic art, which had rejected the more modest role of existing 'to divert and to amuse.' Poets like Wordsworth launched a powerful claim to truth. [...] Wordsworth claims for poetry the phenomenological domain of all human experience."

ABSTRACTS

A radical understanding of modernist medium-specificity would seem to account for Stein's early abandonment of traditional generic distinctions—or their playful straddling—and the renaming of her medium as writing. The one boundary that then remains to be considered is that between writing and talking. Written out to be spoken to an audience, the four lectures that constitute *Narration* (1935) take up where the *Lectures in America* left off and intend to think out narrative in relation to knowledge and the possible merging of prose and poetry. Where the early modernist manifestos vied for attention with a bold typography embodying an often outrageous rhetoric, Stein uses other strategies to engage attention. Her rhetoric of emphasis and persistent approximation give rise to a heightened litany, a sustained oral prosody and bring out the pedagogical dimension of her insistence. Both are effects of her commitment to the process of thinking. Although somewhat inconclusive, the *Narration* lectures constitute one of the rare modernist attempts (with Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous "The Storyteller") to rethink—rather than downplay it against collage or abstraction—narration in a discursive direction, thus paving the way for post-war modernism's embrace of orality as exemplified in John Cage's *Lectures* and David Antin's talk poems.

Stein brouille très tôt les catégories génériques ou les abandonne au profit d'un sur-genre ou médium qu'elle nomme écrire. Reste alors à envisager la frontière entre écrire (*writing*) et parler (*talking*). Composées pour être prononcées en public, les quatre conférences qui constituent *Narration* (1935) reprennent le fil interrompu à la fin des *Lectures in America* et s'attellent à penser la narration en relation avec la connaissance, et l'indistinction à venir entre prose et poésie. Là où les premiers manifestes modernistes attiraient l'attention par des compositions typographiques tapageuses et une rhétorique souvent outrancière, Stein s'en remet à une rhétorique de l'insistance et à une stratégie d'approximation qui fait ressortir la vertu pédagogique de la répétition. Ce style naît de son attachement à la pensée comme processus. Même si elles sont plus exploratoires que probantes, ces quatre conférences constituent une des rares tentatives modernistes (contemporaine du « Conteur » de Walter Benjamin) pour repenser la narration (au lieu de la dénigrer au profit du collage ou de l'abstraction), dans une direction discursive, ouvrant ainsi la voie aux synthèses d'oralité, de récit et de théorie que constituent le *Silence* de John Cage et les *talk poems* de David Antin.

INDEX

Mots-clés: théorie, esthétique, narration, rhétorique, oralité, poésie, prose

Keywords: theory, aesthetics, narration, rhetoric, orality, poetry, prose

AUTHOR

ABIGAIL LANG

Université Paris-Diderot