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# Gertrude Stein and the Making of Frenchmen

*Renée Riese Hubert\**

IF GERTRUDE STEIN CAN BE fruitfully associated with any group, it would be with several generations of expatriates who simply had to live in Paris. Her work can hardly be appreciated in terms of the American literary and cultural scene alone, any more than Beckett's can be appreciated in sole conjunction with his native Ireland. Paris was the scene of Stein's choice, and English her language. For years she was practically compelled to publish her writings in France and to promote them by finding French writers to translate them. Yet not only did she assert again and again that English was her language and associate with Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson and other American writers, but she also toured the States in order to explain her work to an American audience.

A cursory investigation of the presence of Stein in current literary criticism reveals that she persists in belonging to both cultures. In fact, there are fewer Stein titles available in English than translations of her books in France, where several journals have recently devoted special issues to her. According to Catherine Stimpson (in a lecture) her present-day American public of fairly select readers comprises mainly scholars, feminists, and avant-garde authors, notably the "talk poet" David Antin and the language poet Lynn Hejninian. In France, Stein attracts readers from similar groups, eliciting a particularly active response among experimental writers. It is not by coincidence that David Antin, who has stressed the present relevance of Stein in interviews and essays, remains in close contact with French avant-garde poets, especially Jacques Roubaud, an anthologizer of American poetry whose relation to Stein we shall discuss later in this article.

Like several other American authors before her, Gertrude Stein has had the good fortune of attracting an admiring and militant flock of famous French readers. Thanks to Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry, Edgar

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Allen Poe acquired greater fame in France than in his native land. Walt Whitman provided a model for a number of French free verse poets, and William Faulkner for experimental French novelists, including Jean-Paul Sartre. Gertrude Stein, however, did not enjoy this kind of following among French writers during her lifetime, though noted artists such as Picasso, Gris, Valloton, Lipschitz, Cocteau, and Elie Lascaut either illustrated her books or painted her portrait. Several critics have investigated the relationship of Stein to painters and painting, notably Marjorie Perloff, Wendy Steiner, Randa Dubnick, and Jayne Walker, but to my knowledge no French or American scholar has investigated which French writers have read Stein and how they have read her.

The famous Picasso portrait of Stein was completed in 1906, and *A Book Concluding with As a Wife Has a Cow* in 1926. Several French translations appeared between 1929 and 1934: *Dix portraits* and *Morceaux choisis de la fabrication des américains*, by Georges Hugnet, and *Américains d'Amérique* and *Autobiographie*, by Bernard Faÿ. *Trois vies*, by Maurice Schwab and Andrée Valette, was published in 1954. It was not until the late 70s and early 80s that a second wave of translations appeared, closely associated with postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> Stein is a presence in the contemporary French scene not only because 17 volumes of her writings are presently in print in France against some 15 in her own country, but also because she provides a link among 1970-80 avant-garde poets, many of whom recognize her inquiry into the nature of literary language and share her disregard of conventions.

In honor of her key translators of the 30s, Georges Hugnet and Bernard Faÿ, as well as that enterprising mediator, Virgil Thompson, Gertrude Stein wrote portraits. Fruitful exchanges were undoubtedly taking place. Gertrude Stein, like many another expatriate, published a certain number of her English texts in Paris, e.g., *The Making of Americans* at Contact Editions, *A Book Concluding* at the Galerie Simon, and several others at Plain Edition. She took full advantage of her personal relationships, but it is likely that her texts in French had as many readers as her texts in English—that is, very few.

Hugnet was undoubtedly the most interesting of Stein's French readers. The year prior to the publication of his *Morceaux choisis de la fabrication des américains*, he had participated in a concert devoted to compositions by Virgil Thompson performed at the Nouvelle Salle d'Orgues du Conservatoire, a concert which included *Le Berceau de Gertude Stein, ou le mystère de la rue de Fleurus*. Hugnet was a versatile artist. He directed that daring surrealist film *La Perle* and composed photographic collages high-

lighting surrealist paradoxes. Poet, novelist, and playwright, he wrote diverse and experimental works<sup>2</sup> and was the author of *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* and the earliest anthology of surrealist texts. He edited a review, *L'Usage de la Parole*, and directed les Editions de la Montagne. He was also a bookbinder of considerable merit. His books were illustrated by Miró, Picasso, Dalí, Arp, Dominguez. *Oeillades cisélées*, with etchings by Bellmer, is one of the masterpieces of surrealist book art. That Stein's key translator, her most persistent reader and "préfacier," was a surrealist seems surprising in view of her reservations concerning that movement.

What place does Stein reserve for her key translator in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*? Stein remarks that she translated passages from *The Making of Americans* with Hugnet, that he published both volumes of his translations at Les Editions de la Montagne, and that these books were favorably received:

In the meantime, Georges Hugnet wrote a poem called "Enfance." Gertrude Stein offered to translate it for him, but instead wrote a poem about it. This at first pleased Georges Hugnet too much and then did not please him at all. Gertude Stein then called the poem "Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded." (218)

In this way Stein became a reader of Georges Hugnet; she returned his favors. But in reality there was only apparent reciprocity between Stein and Hugnet as readers and translators. Stein points out that she collaborated with Hugnet on his translation of *Morceaux choisis*, and Virgil Thompson helped him with *Dix Portraits*. Stein's French was good enough to write an occasional text in that language, whereas Hugnet, as he himself boasts in his preface, did not know a word of English: "Je ne sais pas l'anglais. Je ne sais pas l'anglais, mais j'ai traduit lettre par lettre et virgule par virgule." ["I don't know English, I don't know English, but I translated letter by letter and comma by comma."] Hugnet, however, clearly states the characteristics of his readings: he remains faithful to Stein's texts, and his deliberate subservience leads him to overt partisanship. Although a surrealist practicing a variety of transgressions and advocating revolutionary infringements upon generic and metaphorical conventions, Hugnet had an inveterate weakness for stylistic elegance. "L'emploi surréaliste de la langue" ["The surrealist use of language"] did not touch him as much as did Gertrude Stein's adventures in grammar and syntax.

Hugnet functioned simultaneously as critic and translator. But how can a translator who does not know the language he is translating avoid betrayals, even with the help of Virgil Thompson and the author herself? Hugnet's preface suggests that he is not as limited as certain of his allega-

tions, such as his confessed ignorance of English and his subservience to Stein, would indicate. He had already written an introduction to "Composition as explanation," in which he described the qualities that attracted him to Stein's text and discussed the problems of translation. Rhythmic and musical qualities struck him most of all; as a result, he did not initially read the text for its narrative meaning or its message, but perceived it primarily from an auditory standpoint—perhaps because it had been read aloud to him. He thus correctly sensed the peculiarity of Stein's experimentation mainly on the level of spoken language.

As the nature of Stein's epic history and her ambition to be complete did not really concern him, he did not handle *Ten portraits* and *The Making of Americans* as generically different. But he did analyze with great accuracy the specific difficulties he faced as translator. Because Stein undermines basic conventions by her use of language, she should, according to Hugnet, be read as a verbal innovator rather than as a storyteller or portraitist. But how can such inventiveness cross over into French? Since Stein provides a yardstick only in relation to language itself, a new way of translating had to be improvised. Stein's originality appeared overwhelming to Hugnet: "Ce qui venait d'elle était à elle." ["What came from her belonged to her."] As she cannot be situated, as her writing is characterized by something childlike, unmediated, authentic, such difference or otherness cannot be rendered by any correct usage of the French language. And Hugnet clearly realized that his French was necessarily more ornate than Stein's English.

Did the youthful French poet, who had published only a single volume of verse illustrated by Max Jacob, merely write down what Stein wanted to see? This seems doubtful in the light of Hugnet's sophisticated statements regarding the problems of translating Stein—or rather, her untranslatability—and the comparison of her allegedly childlike quality with the "chansons de rues" (street songs) of his own childhood. Sound, which Hugnet repeatedly emphasizes, does not reduce the text to a merely expressionistic component, but provides the key to meaning: "Elle a su donner un sens au son et à un assemblage de sons" (11). ["She knew how to give meaning to a sound or an assemblage of sounds."] Far from reducing sound to a facile sensory or emotional satisfaction, Hugnet saw that the liberation that Stein brought to language gave autonomy to the word in the interest of revealing hidden elements, bringing them to the surface, and endowing them with generative power.

While Stein's historical insights in *The Making of Americans* impress him,<sup>3</sup> Hugnet shows even greater enthusiasm for her innovative treatment

of grammar: "Si Gertrude Stein a appris la grammaire comme peu l'ont fait, c'est uniquement pour définitivement s'en débarrasser" (14). ["If Gertrude Stein has learned grammar as very few have, it is only for the purpose of ridding herself of it for good."] Stein in every way subverts her eminent forerunners—Poe and Whitman are mentioned—in order to grant an almost threatening vitality to the word. The dismantling power of her language possesses creative force and vitality. When Hugnet states that the word interacts with the word, he touches on the surrealist program for language: "Les mots s'entraînent, se fixent, se détachent, s'enchaînent, courent de front comme une fuite d'insectes et comme l'insecte chaque mot naît, vit, fait l'amour." ["Words get carried away, settle down, become detached, link themselves together, run abreast like a flight of insects, and like an insect each word is born, lives and makes love."] Such statements would seem to indicate that Hugnet knew far more English than he claims, all the more so because, as we shall see, his so-called experiments in translation resulted mainly in correct if somewhat pedestrian renditions. Perhaps all along he made us believe that he had grasped the Steinian text intuitively as though translation should be played by divination in much the same way as the game of *cadavre exquis*.

Georges Hugnet translated the "Portrait" that bears his name. Verbal and visual portraiture were practiced in Stein's immediate circle, and critics have indeed insisted on the similarity of the subversive process that she and Picasso manifested in the portraits they made of one another. In the Hugnet portrait, Stein as elsewhere makes no attempt to reproduce physical features or to make her subject "come alive." And this portrait, like those of Picasso and Matisse, deals, so to speak, with a person's activities or doings. Stein suggests a process ever repeating itself, ever changing, always becoming. The name featured in the title never figures in the body of the text; it is replaced by her familiar "who" or "the one." Moreover, her point of departure and even her final sentence bypasses or displaces the question of identity. At the time Stein wrote his portrait Georges Hugnet could hardly have been compared to Picasso or Matisse, both of whom could be characterized by such terms as "recognized" or "working." Hugnet was a mere beginner with a promising future. In his own portrait he has to share the limelight with a Geneviève and even a Geronimo. And to these phonetically related names the reader cannot help but add "Gertrude."

Like so many of her successful texts, the Hugnet portrait abounds in assonances, interior rhymes, and alliterations capable of generating ever-expanding associations. Nor is the Hugnet portrait the only text by Stein

that turns readers into detectives who, frustrated in their attempt to discover a conventional solution, wander among enigmas. The poem develops in conjunction with two signs represented by the prepositions "in" and "out." The latter recurs most frequently with verbs: "find out" and "straighten out." It also combines with other letters to form, for instance, "about" and "doubt." From this perspective, the poem would reach a climax in "Redoubt out with about." At the opposite pole would appear the line: "George in our ring." The text thus polarizes what lies inside and what lurks outside. Mediation between the two poles is provided by "find out" or "*straighten out*," which produce motions capable of counteracting the "ring." These primarily intellectual terms refer to the mental operations with which George is associated and which somehow designate and even imprison him. He is totally immersed in translation, an operation that consists in sliding in and out of languages or a specific language, in doubting in the etymological sense of hesitating, in repairing by dint of revision. However, this process—which requires search rather than invention, choice rather than discovery or solution—far from progressing in linear fashion, requires juggling and constantly reopens or rather reiterates possibilities, as evidenced by the obtrusive presence of the word "whether," occurring no less than seven times. "Whether" can combine with any word, occupy any place in a line or unsettle any semblance of grammar or syntax. It thus enjoys greater autonomy than any other word in the poem. But if Stein puts George, accompanied by Geneviève, into the poem implicitly as a translation or a translator whose activity gives mental effort a spatial dimension, it seems that she herself also intrudes as an ironic presence; for grammar, about which she wrote so profusely, is to all intents and purposes personified. In fact, the only truly emotional term of the poem is linked to grammar, which, because it cannot offer an implicit code, has been modulated and broken up, but can hardly be put together again. Grammar moves in and out of the "ring," the very *ring* that makes the poem end in ambiguity rather than in closure. It signals verbal ambiguity, metaphorical and semantic.

The *ring*, moreover, is an object signifying a relationship. In the context of the poem, it suggests not only what binds together two human beings or even members of a group such as the Stein circle, but also a sound as well as the encounter of *in* and *out*. The *ring*, the circle, can thus at one and the same time restate the paradox and foster its transgression. The *ring* as sound becomes manifest in a line such as: "Lain away awake George in our ring." "Ring" may also point to the importance of sounds: their repetitions, their variations in a poem problematizing grammar. Wendy Steiner states:

"In 'George Hugnet,' where the referential aspects of the text are almost totally suppressed, we must take it upon faith that the portrait is in fact about its ostensible subject and not a recording of Stein's random thoughts" (22). The poet has done her utmost to avoid referentiality; her effort, her struggle takes place in the same *ring* (taken also in the sense of arena) as Hugnet's attempt to awaken, as his willingness to accept hesitancy and doubt. Stein's so-called portrait of George Hugnet, by its constant eruptions and interruptions of words, by the deliberate interplay of repetition and displacement, produces a verbal order which stands for the gropings of Stein, never ruled by standard logic and syntax, and those of Hugnet the translator who claimed not to know English.

Hugnet's translation of the portrait was as literal as possible. He followed Stein's word order, her play of shifting between past and present, between singular and plural, between inside and outside. Although with Virgil Thompson's help he had mastered the text, he did not quite succeed in bridging the gap between Stein's language and his own so as to minimize their recurring incompatibilities. Even the best translation will never coincide with the original; and Hugnet's laudable approximations in no way provide a copy as he claims. We have pointed out the ambiguity of the term "ring" translated by "anneau," a word that removes it from a system of interior rhyming while eliminating all allusions to sound. The connection between "ring" and "awake" with their various echoes disappears when rendered by "anneau" and "éveillé." Because Stein's "it is a welcome welcome thing" sounds rather colloquial, it lends a conversational tone to the passage and impels the reader to look for an underlying familiarity. The somewhat clumsy "C'est bien venue bienvenue chose" does not render Stein's language, mainly because it relies on a rhetorical device. In translating whether by "si oui ou non" and "to find out" by "se rendre compte," Hugnet undercuts indeterminacy. He is seriously handicapped in his attempt to deal with a poem that produces its most telling effects through the use and misuse of prepositions endowed with extraordinary syntactical mobility and through a shifting of grammatical categories. In spite of his faithfulness to Stein, Hugnet has failed to render the inventiveness of her language. Though primarily a poet, he remains conventional in his use of language despite his persistent avant-garde ambitions. And in spite of his admiration for and cultivation of Gertrude Stein, his idiom never shows the least trace of her experimentation. *Onan*, a text illustrated by Dalí, which followed by a few years the publication of *Dix portraits*, reveals its modernism by the overwhelming presence of desire, but from a linguistic



point of view it seems barely distinguishable from 19th century pre-Baudelairian narrative poetry.

Gertrude Stein first introduced Bernard Faÿ into the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as a professor at the University of Clermont-Ferrand. His academic training, his persistence in translating her prose: "Melanctha," *The Autobiography* and *The Making of Americans* (in collaboration with la Baronne Seillière), and his critical writings—for instance his conventional "Portrait of Gertrude Stein," as well as his introduction to *Américains d'Amérique*—give him considerable status as a Stein reader.<sup>4</sup> He apparently did not require her help as a translator, and the reliability of his work can be assumed from her comments in *The Autobiography*. In her portrait of Bernard Faÿ she adopts a gardener's point of view toward critical prose writing:

A is an article.  
 They are usable. They are found and able and edible.  
 And so they are predetermined and trimmed.  
 The which is an article. With them they have that.  
 That which.  
 They have the point in which it is close to the purpose.

How does Faÿ's translation compare with that of Hugnet? Such a comparison would involve choice at least as much as felicity, for we would have to measure Hugnet's modest sixty pages against Faÿ's three hundred. And it would seem that Stein, in making the selections of the *Morceaux choisis*, may have had in mind the anthologies prescribed for baccalauréat students, for in these highly representative pieces, critical and theoretical passages take precedence over the anecdotal. Stein was eager to have her French readers understand her position and the nature of her undertaking. Faÿ's *Américains d'Amérique*, however, emphasizes the historical aspects of her fictional project and the narrative quality of her prose, to which his translation brings a continuity and a coherence more overt than in the original at the same time that it intensifies the presence of a narrative voice. The difference in title between *Morceaux choisis de la fabrication des américains* and *Américains d'Amérique* programs the disparity between the two translations. While Hugnet dwells on the writing process, Faÿ favors frescoes or panoramas issuing from a series of portraits.

The confrontation of two passages can point to essential qualities in Stein's writings by revealing differing points of view on the part of the translators. In this sense, both translations can serve as critical tools. Here is Gertude Stein's text: "We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete." Hugnet

strains to render the sentence into literary French: "Nous n'avons besoin que de réaliser nos parents, de nous souvenir de nos grands parents et de nous connaître nous-mêmes et notre histoire est complète." Faÿ: "Connaître l'existence de nos parents, de nos grands-parents, la nôtre, c'est assez pour que notre histoire soit complète." Faÿ prefers a more colloquial tone, a lighter syntactical structure. He subordinates a faithful and literal rendition to textual flow. He opts for the book rather than the word or the line.

The 1933 preface to *Américains d'Amérique* is perhaps the most substantial piece of Stein criticism by a French reader before 1970. By its style, by its consistently fulsome praise, it could be labeled belletristic even by a pre-deconstructive scholar. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to dismiss it, if only because, revised and translated, it served as preface to the Harcourt Brace edition of *The Making of Americans*. According to Faÿ, the author and the text were indissociable; he was subdued no doubt by the magnetic personality of Stein and convinced that he had been present at the birth of the work. But as a worthy colleague of Gustave Lanson, Faÿ could hardly rise above the tradition of "l'homme et l'oeuvre" with its stubborn reliance on biography to explain a literary work.

In *The Making of Americans*, Stein makes much of national traits and distinctions. This belief pervades some of her other texts; for instance she designates Picasso and Juan Gris as Spaniards in order to point to distinguishing features in their work. Faÿ, for similar reasons, insists that Stein's otherness comes from her being American: "The gift of Gertrude Stein's is the gift of America. She is more interested in America, more anxious to understand, express, describe, and give to her readers the real America than any other American writer" (xix). Stein creates a modern America; she includes all Americans; her book is complete. Faÿ seems to have turned Gertrude Stein into a Bergsonian. This might not only imply that Faÿ was himself a Bergsonian who read Stein's works in the light of his philosophical views, but that he recognized the influence on Stein of William James, who in turn had come under the influence of Bergsonism. Terms of fluidity and movement assume positive implications, whereas the oft-repeated "fixité" and "desséché" are negatively charged. According to Faÿ, Stein rejects subject, closure, theme, anecdote; she does not create according to preconceived plans, and therefore her writings do not mummify life and living or dry up its flow. Contrasting Stein with other writers, Faÿ states:

I don't remember having met anyone before Miss Stein, who was able to love life without spoiling or killing it. Generally artists love life like ogres like little children; the best artists are the best man-eaters. (xii)

For Gertude Stein, described as present and as a presence, absence and negation play no part, rupture and fragmentation are unthinkable. For her as for the surrealists, past and memory would constitute a divisive, distorting force. As she is one and undivided so are her words that transmit a full present and echo the basic rhythms of our lives. A force of nature, she has no ancestors and never strikes a literary pose.

Faj strongly contrasts the French tendency to multiply abstractions and Stein's apparent refusal to conceptualize. Facts and examples in French practice move or rather march toward theory. Stein, according to Faj, "doesn't like the dry appearance of ideas, but she loves ideas, and thinking is her great joy" (xvi). Her work, moreover, does not translate anything. Like Hugnet, Faj insists on the unique role in her writings of words which he compares to friends with whom she has concluded inviolable pacts. Beneath the form of the preface and its belletristic style, beneath his uncritical admiration of Stein, Faj builds up a coherent presentation of her work, a presentation in keeping with modernism in its less innovative and tamer aspects.

The late 70s and the 80s have produced a new set of readers. Four special issues of journals devoted to Stein (*Delta*, *In'hui*, *Action poétique*, *Luna Park*) provide translations of short texts, extensive bibliographies of French criticism, and translations. They include critical studies by Marie-Claire Pasquier, Claude Grimal, Gérard-Georges Lemaire, and Jacques Roubaud. Stein, as some articles testify, has had an impact on avant-garde performances in France. Articles on her appear both in the avant-garde provincial periodicals just mentioned and in the prestigious Parisian journals *Critique*, *Change*, and *Les Temps Modernes*.

Marie-Claire Pasquier has contributed to practically all these publications. In two articles published in 1981 in *Les Temps Modernes*, she insists that Stein belongs by right to literature in exile, feminism, postmodernism and above all "écriture." She of course can take advantage of a far greater corpus than Hugnet, or even Faj. She moves from poetry to fiction to plays, appropriately shifting the generic problematics into the postmodern arena and praising Stein as a self-conscious subverter of genres. For these reasons, Stein's still undiscovered genius should be made readily available to the public.

In "L'Écriture et l'exil" (*Temps Modernes*), Stein as a writer in exile, though not compelled for political reasons to displace herself, has the advantage of remaining uncommitted to cliques, parties, and ideological groups. Pasquier asserts that Stein had freed herself from any type of authority and could create her own model. Writing became the justification

of her existence. Psychologically, it afforded a means to cover anxiety; intellectually, it became a quest for *knowing* rather than knowledge. Pasquier defines writing as “une démarche fondatrice” [“a founding step forward”]—a constant thrust forward, a relentless training of the self, a fundamental inquiry into language and the act of composition. By thus detaching Stein from the scene of her times, by invoking the term “exile” in order to render more visible the weight of her self-imposed task, Pasquier does her best to make Gertrude Stein a precursor if not an active member of the postmodern generation. By reading Stein in conjunction with Barthes, Blanchot, Duras, and Beckett, and her theater in the light of such postmodern playwrights as Wilson and Foreman, she succeeds in revealing affinities in their conception of writing, all of which strongly suggests that French readers can now at long last understand Stein on their own terms.

Pasquier does not present her arguments discursively, but by juxtaposing quotations from Stein and various postmodern writers. Coming from an expatriate, her writing stands out as *hors-pays*: “Et déjà se dessine la région, hors-pays, où va se constituer, s’appuyant sur sa seule écriture, celle qui deviendra Stein” (2161). [“And already appears the outline of the region, outside the country, where will take shape, relying on her writing alone, the one who will become Gertrude Stein.”] In addition, exile clears her writing of accidental occurrences, leaving only the essential. Her writing has the characteristics of a trace (no doubt Derridean although his name is not mentioned). Stein proceeds by erasing, by undoing as she progresses: “C’est chez Gertrude Stein un dire qui gomme au fur et à mesure qu’il trace, qui efface toute aspérité accidentelle pour ne garder que l’essentiel...” (2164). [“In Gertrude Stein stating erases in the very act of tracing and rubs out rough spots so as to preserve only the essential.”] Her discourse is based on listening and speaking, so Pasquier states, “Gertrude Stein: écouter, parler et voir.” By maintaining that Stein is a presence and a voice and that her works should be read aloud, she bridges the gap between Stein’s fiction and theater. In her concern for eventual readers, Pasquier takes into account possible negative responses on their part: irritation, illegibility, boredom, malaise, but she manages to counter all objections without heaping unilateral praise on Gertrude Stein in the manner of Hugnet and Faÿ. Stein’s recuperation for postmodernism is accomplished by a subtle manipulation of quotations. For instance, she excerpts from Molloy: “Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever...” (28). As this passage repeats Stein’s notion that the writer

is impelled to write, it comes close to establishing a meaningful correspondence between her work and postmodern readers, who must actively appropriate her "écriture," for they now have to create their own discourse from a disruptive text cunningly presented as complete. Pasquier has displaced Stein's writing all the way from the enforced novelty of modernism to the postmodern problematics of perception and reception.

Jacques Roubaud may well be the most famous French reader of Stein. A dedicated student of the Troubadours, a mathematician by training, a linguist chiefly concerned with transformational grammar, a regular contributor to *Poésie, Change, Action Poétique*, and *Critique*, an active member of "Oulipo," and a translator of several languages, he is considered a major poet and novelist who challenges tradition from a different angle in each of his books. He was co-director of the *Décade* at Cerisy devoted to Stein, a landmark in the growing recognition of the American author in France.

The year preceding his first article on Stein, Roubaud published a book singularly entitled *Autobiographie, chapitre dix*, which I shall briefly attempt to characterize in the hope of discovering affinities with Stein's work. As the subtitle "Poèmes avec des moments de repos en prose" indicates, *Autobiographie* is no more autobiographical than many another contemporary volume of poetry. We are subjected from the beginning to a series of paradoxes and manipulations reminiscent of Stein's favorite operations. The book consists of a constant transgression of genres compensated by the invention and application of self-imposed rules. The poetry, dealing with stress and tension, is interrupted by prose passages intended to provide a welcome rest. Alternations between prose and verse present not only a visible difference in linear arrangement, but also in typography. Prose passages accentuate the prosaic, consisting as they do of recollected narrative fragments carefully dated and situated. Just as Stein inserts words or phrases which act as disruptions in their function as the belated residues of conventionality, Roubaud both exploits and undercuts tradition. Stein's rhymes and assonances, rhythmic repetitions and arrests can happen anywhere. Roubaud favors other kinds of displacement which somehow produce comparable effects. He sometimes uses the same passage both as verse and as prose, a maneuver that is not as surprising as it may seem, for his first book, *Epsilon*, consists of prose sonnets.

In this connection, postmodern critics would never ask: What is poetry? What is prose? but only: What is writing? If there is a question in Roubaud's text, it involves the dichotomy between movement and arrest. In "Nuits sans date," the text seems like a descriptive passage lifted from a biological treatise, with no connection to his so-called autobiographical

enterprise. Whatever norms we may invoke, it can hardly call itself a prose or a verse poem. Information about such parts of the human structure as bones, skulls, jaws, marrow belong indeed to quite a different type of discourse. Repetition upon repetition moving from prose to poetry and back again undermines not only distinctions, but turns the descriptive text from a vehicle of purported information into a purveyor of apparent nonsense. Stein played similar games with her readers.

Just like Stein in *Tender Buttons* and *Portraits and Prayers*, Roubaud eliminates distinctions between subject and object, between main argument and digression as well as continuity of point of view. We are sucked into textuality or rather textualization. "Repos" (rest) which pertains to rhythm and movement rightly or wrongly attributed to verse, is overtly decreed: "Arrêtez-vous—arrêtez-vous un moment—reprenez votre souffle" (141). ["Stop—stop a moment—catch your breath."] By suggesting that his prosaic and versified encounters have exhausted the reader, Roubaud admonishes his "écriture" to slow down. Like Stein in her portrait of Matisse, he has used too many words. Elsewhere his prose is reduced to a single word: "Paix" ["peace"]. If we confront "reprendre le souffle" and "paix," we realize that "Repos" shuns thematics, for it serves as a stage direction for his readers. And there are other ways to prevent readers from progressing according to ingrained habits. Blank spaces appear suddenly in the middle of lines or sentences without apparent reason. Arrows can hurtle the reader forward or even helter-skelter; a single word has the power to truncate itself into three lines of verse; dashes and dots, randomly dispersed on the page, have lost their inalienable right to punctuate.

In spite of the foregoing connections between Roubaud and Stein, in spite of analogous disruptive forces and playful self-parody, we cannot point to overt similarities in their writings. A major difference lies in Roubaud's stated intertextuality: "Il m'est arrivé en 1918 'la première aventure de monsieur Antipyrine,' en 1919 'la deuxième'; en 1918 encore 'la lucarne ovale' de Pierre Reverdy, en 1923 'Rose Sélavy' de Marcel Duchamp et Robert Desnos...." ["The first adventure of Mr. Antipyrine' happened to me in 1918, 'the second' in 1919; also in 1918 it was Pierre Reverdy's 'oval skylight,' in 1923 Marcel Duchamp's and Robert Desnos's 'Rose Sélavy'..."] Twisted quotations and shiftings among several writers occur on every page. Roubaud's proclaimed intertextual appropriation links him to the avant-garde of the early twentieth century. These French contemporaries of Gertrude Stein valorized the word as signifier. Like her, they created a continuous present rather than semantic continuity. Roubaud has adopted

these writers, or rather he has adapted them to his project, in order to go beyond them.

In his article "Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein," Roubaud responds not to three but to four translations. Having at first sought to be accepted on her own terms and according to her own criteria, Gertrude Stein later on made conscious compromises; Roubaud observes, "Elle eut indubitablement le sentiment de se soumettre, d'abaisser son art, de se déplacer, elle, la montagne, vers des touristes au lieu de recevoir la visite émerveillée de pèlerins" (1100). ["She undoubtedly had the feeling that she had submitted, that she had debased her art, that she had moved, she, the mountain, toward the tourists instead of receiving the awestruck visit of pilgrims."] In the last phases, Stein defended her own writings, including *Lectures in America* and *What are Masterpieces?* which Roubaud labels as "autobiographie de son écriture." Stein's own theoretical formulations are the main concern of Roubaud's essay, whereby he becomes the first reader to recognize Stein as a critical writer. French criticism, in his opinion, considerably lags behind American criticism and needs a new *élan*. Roubaud concentrates on prose, discovering the essay, the territory of postmodern self-consciousness leading to fundamental theories on language.

Two years later in his "Gertrude Stein grammaticus," Roubaud insists on her investigations into literary discourse as related to standard grammar and grammatical categories. This essay takes up once again the question that Roubaud had previously raised through his practice in *Autobiographie, chapitre dix*. His argument is often built on quotations, consisting here and there of single sentences taken out of context and thereby acquiring the status of aphorisms or even axioms. This reading may be paradoxical since Roubaud explains Stein's commentaries on syntax and grammar in terms of continuity: "Tout l'argument tient en ces deux exigences: continuité, continuer. La phrase voit disparaître toute ponctuation interne, tout signe intérieur d'une pause, de l'existence d'une unité autonome entre le mot et la phrase" (49). ["The entire argument consists in these two requirements: continuity and going on. The sentence witnesses the disappearance of all internal punctuation, of any interior sign indicating a pause, of the existence of an autonomous unity between the word and the sentence."] The sentence provides the minimal unity; it has no inner pause, hence it must not be deciphered but read as if the reader were in the process of writing it. Roubaud faithfully reports that Stein devaluates the status of the noun while promoting that of the verb deemed capable of reducing disruptive forces. Roubaud, author of *La Vieillesse d'Alexandre*, a

treatise on the disappearance of standard versification, sees Stein in terms of "la crise du vers" ["the crisis of versification"] even if her experiments and theoretical formulations have little in common with the problems faced by French poets at the turn of the century.

Considering Roubaud as critic, grammarian, poet, translator, from whom could we expect a better rendering of *Stanzas in Meditation*? Forty years earlier, Marcel Duchamp had tried his hand at translating "Stanza 69." Duchamp was hardly a poet and he lacked experience as a translator, but his bilingualism, his aptitude at verbal play, his personal acquaintance with Stein and especially his resourcefulness could possibly have compensated for such deficiencies. His translation prefaced the catalogue of an exposition of Picabia drawings. It is likely that the use of the Stanza as a preface may have been the only reason for translating it. But such a use is also a misuse if we consider Stein's poetic text as part of a book and if we take into account its enigmatic and lyrical appeal. Stein's "Stanza" is about as untranslatable as Hugnet's portrait. Duchamp seemingly manifests his understanding of the text by an occasional double rendering, thereby enhancing the accumulation of indefinite modifiers: "This which I wish to say is this." But such colloquialisms interspersed throughout a poem beginning like a fairytale can hardly be retrieved in French: "Oh dear no" differs in tone from "Oh mais non." Indeed, a personal exclamation is reduced to intense negation. Interior rhymes, assonances, onomatopoeia are omitted. Repetitions and reversals such as "ought" and "caught," which bind several lines together, find no echo in the translation. The French gravitates toward a more intellectual statement than the original, losing along the way Stein's subtle search of self. Duchamp appears to have struggled with the "Stanza," whose English title he misquoted; and he also mistranslated "Stanzas" by his use of "stances" instead of "strophes."

Roubaud, on the other hand, succeeds better at rendering the lyrical aspects of the text even if he favors words that have a distinct postmodern flavor: "to care," instead of being rendered by "soigner" or even "faire plaisir," is translated by "désir." The brief and subtle "Part V. Stanza 13" loses little in translation:

There can be pink with white or white with rose  
 or there can be white with rose and pink with mauve  
 or even there can be white with yellow and yellow with blue  
 or even if even it is rose with white and blue  
 and so there is no yellow there but by accident



Il peut y avoir du rose avec du blanc ou du blanc avec du rose  
 ou bien il peut y avoir du blanc avec une rose et du rose avec du mauve  
 ou bien même il peut y avoir du blanc avec du jaune et du jaune avec du bleu  
 ou même si même il y a une rose avec du blanc et du bleu  
 et ainsi il n'y a pas de jaune là, sinon par accident

The poem opens with revealing alternatives and potentials. Conditions eventually interfere with this open range of choices. Restrictions pervade, leading toward a negative conclusion. No emotional value is placed on this decline, presented as a form of reasoning in which words such as "even," "if," and "so" play a significant part. A delicate array of colors foregrounds "pink," "mauve," and "rose." Like shades on a canvas they blend, they can be matched. But they also denote flowers such as roses and pinks. By using adjectives to evoke flowers Stein undercuts the role of the noun and heightens the rhythm, thereby conforming to her own theories previously restated by Roubaud himself who surprisingly reinstates the noun: "Il peut y avoir du rose avec du blanc." He thus turns colors into objects rather than tones and rhythms into statements. The beginning of the English poem consists of permutations in the word order as though to express the reversal between botany and colors. However, the translator has captured the double function of words indicative of color which he renders by alternations of articles: "du" and "une." He takes cognizance of Stein's privileging of indefinite articles and prepositions, which he calls the heroes of Stein's sentences: "Car il y a une dichotomie, une séparation, un 'either/or' que Gertrude Stein veut par la phrase tout à la fois affirmer, célébrer, mais à tout moment aussi, brouiller, effacer et confondre" ("Stein grammaticus" 57). ["For there is a dichotomy, a cleavage, an either/or that Gertrude wishes by means of the sentence simultaneously to assert, celebrate, but also at every moment to jumble, erase and confuse."] This quotation provides a fitting commentary on and even, we are tempted to say, a rendition of "Part V. Stanza 13."

Gérard-Georges Lemaire, who shared with Roubaud the task of organizing the Cerisy decade, translated and edited *Une Pièce circulaire*, illustrated in proper postmodern fashion. He also wrote an article on Denis Roche, a revolutionary poet of the vocal *Tel Quel* group, in an issue of *Critique* devoted to contemporary French poetry. Denis Roche published a text accompanied by his own translation from Stein's *Poetry and Grammar* in the *In'hui* volume. His "Traduction développée" is followed by a brief commentary. For Roche, literal translation of Stein has become an impossibility. Far from suggesting by this aporia that Stein's text may possess some hidden referential meaning that only an interpretive or symbolic

translation might yield, he simply suggests that a word-for-word translation in the manner of Hugnet would be tantamount to accepting that the text has boundaries, that it has established itself once and for all, that he as reader can enter into it and, worst of all, that it provides a clear form of communication and decidability. Such an acceptance would imply that Stein is an author ever present in her text and would therefore be in flagrant contradiction with the theories he so subversively exposed in *Le Mécrit* and *Notre antéfixe!*

Roche's translation, which considerably expands the original, emphasizes Stein's creative idiosyncrasies. He ostentatiously displays his understanding of the American poet's verbal properties and experimentation by taking pains to foreground the present participle, the "beings" and the "doings," by respecting the indefinites "somewhat" and "something," by recognizing the role of modal verbs such as "would" and "could." Nor has he overlooked adverbs such as "certainly" and "completely." At the end he even provides the reader with a statistical account: "certainly" and "really" appear 35 times; "this one" and "that one" 98. Obviously he has carefully prepared himself for his presentation of Stein's mannerisms.

Roche finds ways and means of translating some words twice in succession: "living" is rendered by "vivant" as well as by "en train de vivre." Far from betraying the hesitation of Duchamp or even of choice, this device asserts the autonomy of the ironic translator who helpfully provides synonyms in a text where meaning is totally subverted. Two words that seemingly say the same thing when the textual surface says nothing but merely *says* is a way of further undermining language by destroying the fundamental function of translation. The more Roche follows Stein's text and the more he extends it, the more he deconstructs it. I refer less to Derrida's approach than to Roche's awareness of postmodern forms of mechanization. "Vivant" doubling with "en train de vivre" is not the only expansion taking place at that particular moment, for Roche adds "plein de vie" and "bon vivant." He thus concretizes as though he were making concessions to a not very bright reader, but in reality he has deliberately introduced a misreading of the English text. His translation becomes a sort of "mécrit" of Gertrude Stein. Soon her "someone" and "one," by turning into "l'homme" and "il," suggest the sort of personification which Stein so carefully avoided. Roche follows the text while modifying it by amplification and making it his own. Nevertheless, he denies his own identity in the very act of repeatedly asserting himself in a text bearing the title of "Roche." He clearly belongs to the decade of the death of the author.

His stress on what is peculiar to Stein leads to a style far removed from Hugnet's elegant French. Present participles, for instance, play almost antithetical roles in French and in English. In the course of his translation, Roche perversely sinks more and more deeply into "franglais." Roche, a proclaimed cultural revolutionary, thoroughly violates both lexically and syntactically the French language consecrated to this very day by the "Quarante Immortels." He provides a text which ostentatiously displays itself as a translation from the English and not at all as a French text. And it is a translation from an English text which disregards standard English. Such procedures do not mean that he has overlooked the problem of untranslatability, for not only does he provide several words for one and make himself alternatively present and absent, but, especially toward the end, he leaves some words in the original—nondescript words quite incapable of conveying untranslatable cultural allusions. The French poet emphasizes the linguistic shifts that Stein imposes on her reader, shifts that paradoxically enable him to state that the various idiosyncrasies he has stressed remain untranslatable. His rendition is a developed translation not only because of the supplemental words but because he adds theory to practice, linking the original to the translation by conveying its rhythmic qualities while blurring the notions of original and copy.

Roche ends his commentary with a statement concerning the absence of his father from the text, a statement that can be construed as an act of revolt against heritage, ancestry, and authority. What matters to him is the vitality of the textual process where words constantly rub against one another. The textual surface may dry up, but transformation and subversion will well up forever. Roche's commentary is entitled "Stein opératrice." Her text operates not in order to become or be itself, but to bring forth another Roche: Stein's postmodern reader. Contrary to modernist writers, Roche rejects depth along with reader/writer penetrability which includes what was once an author. The poet by dint of manipulation ultimately makes Stein's "one" indistinguishable from the postmodern "other."

French writers, who have acknowledged Stein since the 1920s, provide insights into her work which have not surfaced as strongly in comparable American criticism. The early French responses necessarily sought to reveal a startling novelty which richly deserved to be emphasized by means of prefaces and translations. This outspoken otherness was not only French "business" but American as well, particularly if we remember that the most American of Stein's texts, *The Making of Americans*, first saw light in France and that the American edition of 1933 was introduced by a transla-

tion of a previously published French preface. Translations, when it comes to defining the status of Stein in two continents, are more than a means to a specific end, since their study, even if it inevitably leads to the unmasking of flaws, contributes to an assessment of Stein relevant in the postmodern American literary and cultural scene.

The fact that earlier and later translators of Stein approach text and translation from a different perspective corresponds, of course, to a radical change in the status of translation in general, a change by which the American literary scene, so open to the structuralists and poststructuralists such as Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, is considerably affected. After Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" and Derrida's *Deconstruction and Criticism*, translations, which can no longer be dissociated from theory, tend to become crucial texts. They cease to be an exercise in accuracy—an accuracy whose unattainability leads to the conclusion of untranslatability or incompatibility between two languages. The concept of translation has undergone its own deconstruction. As the erosion of generic distinctions has led to new concerns about textualization, so the issue of translation is no longer restricted to such imperatives as "get the sense" or "get the feel of it," involving as it does a variety of critical responses and discourses. When Robert Rauschenberg illustrates the *Inferno*, he assumes the role of translator in his attempt to make the medieval Italian text relevant to contemporary American culture. Samuel Beckett, who also bridges several cultures and languages, provides as self-translator, so critics have shown, a new version of his original text, which is to a certain degree rendered both from silence and from another language.

Stein's French interpreters have been forced into close readings by the idiosyncratic nature of her text and the extraordinary range of her literary enterprises. For that reason, in the postmodern area especially, they have not appropriated her texts in a standard way, but "activated" them. As they grappled with Stein's specific problematics, they focused, more than the American critics (so often concerned with feminist and cubist issues) on her "différence." Therefore Roche's and Roubaud's complex responses pertain to the American postmodern scene as it turns, most vocally, past and present writings into theoretical adventures.

## NOTES

1. *Ida*, by Daniel Mauroc, *Lectures en Amérique*, by Claude Grimal, *L'Autobiographie de tout le monde*, by Marie-France de Palomera, *L'Histoire géographique de l'Amérique* and *Une Pièce circulaire*, by Gérard-Georges Lemaire were published in the late 70s and early 80s, the latter with illustrations by postmodern artists.

2. Hugnet's experimental works included *Le Droit de Varech*, *La Belle en dormant* and *La Septième face du dé*.

3. Hugnet stated, "Le peuple américain, ce peuple phénomène est décrit, jugé, démonté dans ce livre" (13). ["The American people, that wonder people is described, judged, dismantled in this book."]

4. The translations of the *Autobiography* and *The Making of Americans* have been reissued by Stock and Gallimard.

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