

## ALANNAH CLAMP

### ON ABSENCES

IN GERTRUDE STEIN'S published version of *Stanzas in Meditations*, there are no instances of the word 'may'. There are no months of May or maybes, no dismays or mayhems.

Ulla Dydo explains the story of why there are no 'mays' in her 2003 book *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises 1923–1934*. *Stanzas in Meditation* was completed by Stein in the summer of 1932. Alice Toklas, Gertrude Stein's partner of 39 years, then typed out the manuscript. After Alice finished typing out *Stanzas*, she came across a manuscript for Gertrude's first novel *Q.E.D.*, which Stein had written almost thirty years earlier in 1903 but had not yet been published.<sup>1</sup>

*Q.E.D.* is a novel based on a romantic three-way love affair involving Gertrude and two friends. Gertrude becomes infatuated with one of the women, May Bookstaver. In both the book and in life they have sex, which Gertrude later describes as her sexual awakening.

Accordingly, Alice was enraged with jealousy. When they started dating, they had disclosed their former lovers to each other. Gertrude had not mentioned May nor had she mentioned the book, which detailed their love and provided a level of attention to May that Alice had yet to receive. A massive fight between the two ensued.

It's hard to know if Alice demanded that

Gertrude remove the 'mays' or if Gertrude offered, but throughout the final edit 'may' is switched to 'can', 'maybe' is exchanged for 'can be', and the month of May is substituted with April. There is a violence to the edit, often tearing through the piece of paper beneath. Sometimes the edits flow, and sometimes they're awkwardly apparent.



In a 2012 edition of *Stanzas*, the book is introduced with several essays which hint at the book being impossible to read, including for the people who have been asked to contribute. The first essay by Joan Retallack is titled "On Not Not Reading *Stanzas in Meditations*: Pressures and Pleasures of the Text," implying that the obvious choice is to not read the book. Another essay by poet John Ashbury is simply titled "The Impossible Gertrude Stein, Review of the 1956 *Stanzas in Meditation*." Critic D.C. Yalden-Thomson declared that perhaps there was some influence of German philosophers on the book because of "Gertrude Stein's contempt for clarity."<sup>2</sup> *The Kenyon Review* declared it "perhaps the dreariest long poem in the world."<sup>3</sup>

Trying to understand this gesture of apparent self-sabotage is interesting because it puts forward the notion that perhaps the artist cannot be the defender of their work.

If an artist makes edits to improve the work, it's part of the creative process. But if an artist makes edits and diminishes their

work, who can step in to help them despite themselves? The infrastructure that publicizes and distributes art has built-in mechanisms like editors, curators, professors, and peers. But these are most effective when the work is brand new and the persuasions from others are largely invisible. When the work already exists, the optics of interfering presents different challenges.

One strategy around this is what literary scholar Donald Reiman calls ‘versioning’. In versioning, two almost identical but slightly altered works are both considered valid. Literature has space for versioning baked into its conception because readers are already familiar with inexact translations presented as the limits of their language and cultural ‘know-how’, and not the limits of the author’s abilities.

However, the notion that a work can be splintered at the main root is different because it undercuts the idea that the artist is the unique authority of their work. What is art except a series of choices? What to add, what take away, and when is the artist no longer the main ‘maker of choices’ for an artwork? Versioning provides the opportunity for two texts to coexist—keeping the artist’s autonomy intact while offering the option to cherry pick the better version.

But helping Stein, despite herself, is complicated. Thinking about versions of the manuscript and then writing apologetic intro essays to the book explaining Alice’s apparent power over Gertrude along with contextualizing the book as a challenge rather than a failure is a way of softening the ramifications of a compromised artwork. These gestures of saving Stein assume that the ‘true’ audience of the text is them, and not Alice. For Alice this text is not compromised at all, in fact it is improved. Art is routinely considered from the vantage of a pure audience comprised of ideal observers.

Adam Smith and David Hume both had iterations of the Ideal Observer Theory, but Roderick Firth gave it its modern

articulation in his paper “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer.” At its most reductive, the Ideal Observer is a hypothetical person who makes ethical judgments neutrally and fully informed.

To do this the Ideal Observer must be omniscient, omniperceptive, disinterested, dispassionate, consistent, and in other respects *normal*. Firth also stipulates that the observer should not be family or close to the subjects because that would conflict with painting a disinterested and dispassionate stance. Therefore the Ideal Observer stands in opposition to relativism or individual subjectivity.

When Firth conceived of the Ideal Observer it was a way to articulate a vantage point and utilize that vantage in ethical arguments and not necessarily aesthetic judgments. Art presents a different set of judging conditions and challenges. To modify the original definition to fit aesthetic judgments, John Hospers redefines the list attributes initially set forth by Firth in his paper. Here, he borrows Paul Taylor’s unpublished definition. The augmented characteristics are as follows: The observer must fully understand the discipline. The observer should have a high degree of discriminative sensitivity, some practice in the creative endeavour in question, a considerable understanding of art history, aesthetic experience, intellectual analysis, and a willingness to reason.<sup>4</sup>

This is a somewhat amazing list of characteristics that treats the observer of art with as much rarity as the ‘genius’ that produced the work in the first place. Even though each of these characteristics can be whittled down, Taylor’s definition does address a broad attitude towards qualifications required for judging art.

The ideas which inform the Ideal Observer Theory are pervasive although they are often not named so clearly. For instance, in art school, admission procedure typically involves a

panel of experts assessing portfolios anonymously. For the critics themselves viewing is often speculative. Other artists gather around the artwork, typically in a studio or classroom while imagining it as a gallery with some different distant audience. Government granting bodies are similarly structured with juries that have qualifications that mirror those described in Hosper's revised definition.

Coopting the posture of an Ideal Observer has its usefulness. It neatly delineates whose deficit is whose. For instance, if the viewer lacks essential knowledge of the discipline, then it's their fault that they do not know enough, not the artwork's fault for not providing enough. It is common to hear people express their own awareness of this deficit by saying that "they don't get it" about an artwork. This of course implies that there is something to "get" in the first place, as though another viewer of the work would be able to comprehend.

On the other side, if the artwork lacks an apparent awareness of the references it is inadvertently making, or if it references a tired trope, then it is the artist's fault for not understanding their discipline well enough. These are not socially enforced boundaries as much as they are personal guidelines which tend to be self-imposed or subtly rewarded and punished through the larger infrastructure of art.

In the case of Stein's *Stanzas*, the book's critical feedback attempts to address the clear deficit in this work compared to her more celebrated texts. The book lacks, and no one seems to like it. It's impossible to know precisely how redacting 'may' throughout affected the book, but considering how much Stein was a stickler for language removal signifies a compromise.

The workaround is to maintain the framework of the Ideal Observer and the omniscient audience while explaining the deficit away, either by versioning or contextualizing. The book was published once and then not again until Ulla Dydo 'discovered'

the discrepancies in Stein's handwritten manuscript and the finished typed copy. Dydo's discovery, which could have easily gone unnoticed, offered an opportunity to generate multiple versions of the text while having the added benefit of paralleling a mediocre book with an intriguing story. All of this adds to compensate for the deficit; however, it still maintains the Ideal Observer framework. It merely makes the book less of a failure within it.

However, there is only a deficit within this specific framework. If the possibility exists that there is no Ideal Observer, then the primary consumer of the work is not a specific art audience, nor is it an Ideal Observer or the accomplished academics and authors who write introductory texts to books. The primary consumer of the work is Alice, the person closest to Gertrude, who worked with her, slept with her, loved her, and lived with her for decades. Under the lens of the Ideal Observer, Alice's opinion hardly qualifies. Alice is not an expert in the field, she has no experience writing prose, and she is biased by her closeness with Gertrude. In this regard, the compromising, if not self-sabotaging gesture, of crossing out all the 'mays' is not compromising. It's a love letter.

#### Notes

1. I first heard of this story in a talk by artist Charlotte Prodger at the Glasgow School of Art in 2016.
2. Elizabeth Winston, "Gertrude Stein's Mediating Stanzas," *Biography* 9, no. 3 (1986), 230
3. Ibid.
4. Elmer H. Duncan, "The Ideal Aesthetic Observer: A Second Look," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 1 (1970), 48

#### Image

1. From the Vancouver Archive, Woman at The Ranch, Bowen Island B.C circa 1920.