

Money on My Mind: Stein's Meditations

Kristin Grogan

Hertford College, University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: This essay looks at Gertrude Stein's fraught relationship with money across her career, from the strong ethical importance that she attached to it in her early prose through to her crisis of value after the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Focusing on her 1932 long poem *Stanzas in Meditation*, I argue that Stein's language works to undermine our shared social and economic language while at the same time revealing a profound anxiety about money. Ultimately, I suggest that in its language of number and measurement *Stanzas* describes and enacts an intellectual labor, the logic of which is incompatible with wage labor or capital's gendered hierarchy of values.

IN 1933 THE PUBLICATION OF *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* rocketed Gertrude Stein out of her status as a cult figure—a writer's writer—and into celebrity proper. The following year she returned to the United States for the first time in over three decades for a lecture tour. But the country she arrived in was not the one she had left in the gilded years of the turn of the century. Stein came back to a United States shaken by the political and economic shocks of the Great Depression, a country that had already experienced over four years of unprecedented economic decline that kept unemployment high and revealed the chasms between profit, wages, and the prices of commodities, galvanizing a home-grown Communist movement that had been incubating for years and an equally strong left-wing print culture. Against the backdrop of economic crisis, Stein was at the peak of her career. She was on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1933; received more offers to write for popular magazines; and her name and image began to be used in advertising—Bergdorf Goodman named a gown "Saint" after the costumes used in her opera,

Four Saints in Three Acts, and used a variation on her “rose is a rose is a rose” in advertisements.¹ Her arrival in her home country was announced in lights, in an electric sign circling Times Square: “Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York, Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York.”²

At first her new marketability was a welcome change.³ “I am most pleased with everything,” Stein wrote to Carl Van Vechten in April 1933. “I love being rich, not as yet so awful rich but with prospects, it makes me all cheery inside, I don’t know why it should but it does.”⁴ But this pleasure was not to last, and in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, written four years later, Stein painted a rather different picture of when one’s writing suddenly acquired a substantial exchange value:

slowly everything changed inside me. Yes of course it did, because suddenly it was all different, what I did had a value that made people ready to pay, up to that time everything I did had a value because nobody was ready to pay. It is funny about money. And it is funny about identity. You are you because your little dog knows you, but when your public knows you and does not want to pay for you and when your public knows you and does want to pay for you, you are not the same you.⁵

She describes the Times Square sign as profoundly destabilizing: “we saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting. Anybody saying how do you to you and knowing your name may be upsetting but on the whole it is natural enough but to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but it does give me a little shock of recognition and non-recognition.”⁶ And crucially, this change in recognition had an effect on Stein’s ability to work. “I did no writing,” she tells us. “I had written and was writing nothing. Nothing inside me needed to be written.”⁷ For Stein, that impersonal measure of value meant the confusing of her self-sufficient, internal sense of her worth (her “real” value) with the arbitrary and external. In Luke Carson’s terms, the “risk involved in success is revealed in the chiasmic confusion of inside and outside that results from the circulation of the commodity on the market.”⁸

In this essay, I aim to pay further attention to that murky boundary between inside and outside, between the logic of the market and knowledge of the self, and to the confusing, often contradictory importance that money held for Stein. Stein often wrote about desiring money and about her love of spending money. At the same time, the formal logic of Stein’s writing works to

¹ For more on the use of Stein in advertising, see Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

² *Ibid.*, 173.

³ Stein’s first purchases with her new income were an eight-cylinder Ford and “the most expensive coat made to order by Hermes” for her poodle, Basket. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (London: William Heinemann, 1938), 28.

⁴ Gertrude Stein to Carl Van Vechten, April 27, 1933, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 265.

⁵ Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography*, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ Luke Carson, *Consumption and Depression in Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and Ezra Pound* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999), 60. Deborah M. Mix makes a similar point: “In the end,” she writes, “Stein found herself to be reduced to the status of personality . . . and allied with the temporary fashion of clothing and trends, rather than recognized as a timeless genius, something she firmly believed herself to be.” Deborah M. Mix, “Gertrude Stein’s Currency,” in *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, ed. Jonathan Goldman and Aaron Jaffe (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 94.

destabilize our social and economic structures. Nowhere is this more evident, I suggest, than in her 1932 long poem *Stanzas in Meditation*. The language of the market is embedded in Stein's *Stanzas*, but in a way that undercuts its logic while also revealing a Depression-era anxiety about money that would persist throughout the 1930s. If part of Stein's anxiety about money had been the lack of money earned from her own writing—rendering her writing not only “valueless” but also not “real work”—her *Stanzas* resituates that value within the labor of thought, or meditation.

MONEY MONEY MONEY

Stein's relationship with money was ambiguous, shuttling between criticism and fascination throughout her career. In her early novella *Q.E.D.*, Adele, Stein's stand-in character, is described as having a “strong sense of the sanctity of money obligations. She recognized as paramount the necessary return for value received in all cash considerations. Perhaps Helen had her own money but of this Adele was exceedingly doubtful.”⁹ Helen is unable to extract herself from the wealthy and manipulative Mabel, and this binds money, sexuality, and power together. In *Three Lives* Stein often highlights the frugality of the hardworking good Anna against the excesses of the lazy Miss Mathilda: “And I slave and slave to save the money and you go out and spend it all on foolishness,’ the good Anna would complain.”¹⁰ Frugality and thrift, the careful management of one's money, and “hard work” are matters of moral character in Stein's early writing; financial mismanagement or excess is often the mark of a morally deficient or treacherous character.

Stein describes the development of financial awareness in a passage of *The Making of Americans*. The narrator has just been refused a lesson on the grounds that she cannot pay until her next monthly income installment arrives, and she responds:

I had a confused feeling then. Money was something I was owning yes, but not owning because it was like being in myself that I needed to be living, having money was as natural to me then as being in living and I could not be spending it irregularly, I must spend it as an income. I had it yes but not to give except when regularly I had some. It was confusing that I was so certain I had not the money then and yet certainly I could get the money then but it was not possible to get the money then for I could not feel I could be needing really to be spending the money I could get then when it was not the time to get this money as money to be spending. Some have such a feeling in living, some have not such a feeling in living. Some cannot really believe it that any one is spending money when they are not certain that the family have money that gives that money to them.¹¹

⁹ Gertrude Stein, *Q.E.D.*, in *Writings, 1903–32* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 46.

¹⁰ Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives*, in *ibid.*, 77.

¹¹ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 717. Stein recounts the incident in *Everybody's Autobiography*: “When I was at Radcliffe I was to pass my entrance examinations after I had been there some years. I had left the high school young and I had never learned French and German having had it and forgotten it and I knew a lot but still there were some examinations that knowing a lot did not help advanced Latin was one and so Margaret Lewis a graduate student was to teach me enough to get through. We worked together and I was to pay her at the end of the month. I had paid her and then one month I had spent all my month's money in going to the opera and so I said to her do you mind if I do not pay you as I have not got any money. She said no reflectively and then she said what do you mean when you say you have no money, Oh I said I mean I have spent my month's money and I haven't any. Well she said reflectively your father and mother are dead you have your own money haven't you. Yes I said. Well then she said you have the money to pay me now I do not need it but you have it so you must not say you haven't got it. Yes I said but you see I cannot use that because that is what I have not got I only have a month's money, yes she said but you see those who earn money

The “confused feeling” is caused by the presence or absence of money, by the need to manage having an income alongside an awareness that others labor for a wage. The problem with money is also a problem of understanding those who do not have money, and those who must labor for their money, a situation of which the independently wealthy Stein had no knowledge. In this way, having or not having money becomes a question of relating to those around us and of understanding and navigating one’s place in the social world. Financial management is also bound up with the patriarchal familial structure in which Stein was given money by her brother: “I have not got the money to-day and I will have it in three weeks from to-day, my brother sends me my money every month.”¹² If in *Q.E.D.* money was explicitly sexual, here it is gendered, linked to patriarchal forms of social and familial hierarchy.

Stein’s early life and the formative years of her career took place against the backdrop of immense economic change. From the end of the Civil War to the late nineteenth century, rapid industrial expansion took place across the United States, made possible by the country’s vast natural resources and labor reserves. Ruthless business leaders and financiers built up huge monopolies—the railroad empires of Gould, Harriman, and Hill; the Carnegie steel empire; the Rockefeller oil empire—aided by a government committed to the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, creating an unprecedented concentration of wealth and power. Labor was swept into these industries and quickly degraded; previously independent craftsmen were brought into factories, mills, and foundries, where their complex work became economically valueless and their tasks were increasingly simplified.¹³ Between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, northern Progressives, worried about the nation’s unbridled individualism, sought to balance capitalist prerogatives with limited regulation and advocated a tempered individualism, but their efforts resulted in little meaningful or widely distributed change in the years leading up to the Depression.¹⁴ The 1920s were dominated by probusiness government, and it wasn’t until Roosevelt’s New Deal that labor became a direct concern of the national administration. When Stein died in 1946, U.S. capitalism was just entering its so-called golden age.

U.S. literary modernism grew out of this uneven political and economic soil. Several of Stein’s peers were deeply hostile to finance capitalism, arguing that in this context modern poetry must adopt a new moral responsibility. Alec Marsh has noted that for Social Creditors like Pound and Williams, money held enormous importance because of its “power to utter the otherwise inchoate wishes of social, political, and economic power that far exceeded the traditional poet’s linguistic and literary resources.”¹⁵ In response, the modernist poet would have to cultivate new strategies and formal resources. Stein shared none of Williams’s or Pound’s political radicalism, but her writing was nevertheless informed by this background of economic change. Sometimes in her early writing Stein foregrounds consumerism and consumption, as in her portrait “Bon

have not got it but then when they have not got it they have not got it. I was much surprised and I never forgot it. Now I am not so much surprised because after all an income is an income whether you earn it or whether you have it and I was right and she was right about it” (123–24).

¹² Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 717.

¹³ For a much fuller account, see Foster Rhea Dulles and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Labour in America: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2010).

¹⁴ See Lawrence B. Goodheart and Richard O. Curry, “A Confusion of Voices: The Crisis of Individualism in Twentieth-Century America,” in *American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-national Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1991), 190.

¹⁵ Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 5.

Marché Weather,” much of which hinges on the term “buying”: “There are a great many things a great many are buying. There are a great many things a very great many are buying.”¹⁶ The effect of this portrait’s repetition is to mimic the cornucopia of commodities for sale in the Parisian department store. In “Flirting at the Bon Marché,” buying becomes shopping, and it acquires a somewhat different tone. The portrait ends by describing those who “do not know very well that their way of living is a dull one, is a tedious enough one, is a dreary enough one.” “Some of such of them,” Stein tells us, “are changing, are shopping, some of such of them are shopping and shopping is something.”¹⁷ We can read this portrait as a critique of the shallowness of shopping as a replacement for meaningful experience or a rich inner life and as a broader comment about consumer capitalism’s manipulation of our sense of emotional fulfillment. Here, the portrait’s repetitions, we might propose, enact the hollow repetition of the shoppers’ dreary lives.

But we should pause, I think, before attributing to Stein an unambiguously hostile attitude toward consumer capitalism. The joy of spending money and the desire to make money from writing are recurring themes in Stein’s writing. Sometimes she compares writing and spending money. Writing “is what I like best,” she proclaims in “And Now.” “I like it even better than spending money although there is no pleasure so sweet as the pleasure of spending money but the pleasure of writing is longer.”¹⁸ The pleasure of writing is not greater or stronger but “longer,” for writing takes more time and is more durable than the act of spending money. The link between writing and money comes out most clearly in *Ida*, her novel published in 1941:

She, well she, she had written a lovely book but nobody took the lovely book nobody paid her money for the lovely book they never gave her money, never never never and she was poor and they needed money oh yes they did she and her lover.

And she sat and she wrote and she longed for money for she had a lover and all she needed was money to live and love, money money money.

So she wrote and she hoped and she wrote and she sighed and she wanted money, money money, for herself and for love for love and for herself, money money money.¹⁹

“Money money money”: that triplicate repetition makes a kind of chant out of money. Although written after Stein had earned fame and fortune from the *Autobiography*, *Ida* reflects on a long-standing concern of her early writing life. Stein’s was a literary career marked by an almost total inability to be published and by a series of difficult relationships with publishers who refused to print her work on the grounds of its unmarketability.²⁰ Why did Stein want to be paid for her work? Part of the reason is that according to capital’s gendered logic, work that is waged or otherwise remunerated is validated *as* work, and work that is not waged—especially women’s reproductive labor—does not count as work. “Just as female labour, especially when repetitive,

¹⁶ Gertrude Stein, “Bon Marché Weather,” in *Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother; and Other Early Portraits*, Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951), 352.

¹⁷ Gertrude Stein, “Flirting at the Bon Marché,” in *ibid.*, 355.

¹⁸ Gertrude Stein, *How Writing Is Written* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 64.

¹⁹ Gertrude Stein, *Ida*, in *Writings, 1932–46* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 683.

²⁰ Several decades before she wrote *Ida*, Stein had lamented to Carl Van Vechten in April 1916 that “about every three months I get sad. I make so much absorbing literature with such attractive titles and even if I could be as popular as Jenny Lend where oh where is the man to publish me in series. Perhaps some day you will meet him. He can do me as cheaply and as simply as he likes but I would so like to be done. Alas” (Stein to Van Vechten, April 18, 1916, in *Letters*, 53).

domestic, or reproductive, was prone to being naturalized and thereby rendered invisible,” Natalia Cecire points out, “female writing was prone to being described as a mere emanation of the body.”²¹ Stein’s early detractors often insisted that her writing did not constitute labor—that it was automatically, spontaneously, or unconsciously produced. Money earned would signify work recognized.²²

For all that Stein, at least initially, internalized money as a determiner of labor, hers was an aesthetic project that worked in part to undo the social structures that underpin our use of language, one use of which is the maintenance of patriarchal capitalism. Stein’s theories of the relationship between money and writing come to the fore in “Patriarchal Poetry” from 1927, a fifty-page piece that moves between poetic lines and longer prose paragraphs and that thinks about the relationship between language and its gendered inheritance. Early in the poem Stein turns to what it means to make money:

Might a bit of it be all the would be might be if a bit of it be all they would be if it if it would be all be if it would be a bit of all of it would be, a very great difference between making money peaceably and making money peaceably a great difference between making money making money peaceably making money peaceably making money peaceably.²³

The point, of course, is that there is no difference between making money peaceably and making money peaceably, or to put it another way, the poem offers something that it then refuses to give. Stein sets up a comparison—between “making money peaceably,” or ethically, and, we might presume, making money unethically—but offers only one comparative term. The effect is to disallow any difference and to remind us of the power structures that govern our economic lives. Throughout “Patriarchal Poetry,” Stein confounds the notion of number and counting more broadly. “Patriarchal poetry shall be as much as if it was counted from one to one hundred,” Stein tells us, and counting from one to one hundred in a clear or linear sense is what the poem resolutely refuses to do.²⁴ Instead, we get passages such as this: “Once threes letting two sees letting two three threes letting it be after these two these threes can be two near threes in threes twos letting two in two twos slower twos choose twos threes never came twos two twos relieve threes twos threes.”²⁵ Part of the poem’s goal, as several critics have noted, is to reorder the logical patterns of patriarchal words, with “their origin and their history,” as Stein puts it, in order to

²¹ Natalia Cecire, “Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein,” *ELH* 82, no. 1 (2015): 291.

²² See, for example, Wyndham Lewis’s description of Stein’s writing as being “of the sausage, by-the-yard variety.” Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 59. Mike Gold, the editor of *New Masses*, famously declared Stein to be a practitioner of an “idle art” which “reflects the madness of the whole system of capitalist values.” Mike Gold, “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot,” *New Masses*, 1934; reprinted in Michael Gold, *Change the World!* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937). Jeff Solomon has traced the popular perception of Stein’s debauched laziness, writing that “from the 1910s until the 1930s,” there were “many pictures of Gertrude Stein lounging on a divan that drew from fin-de-siècle clichés as well as tropes of silent films of the next generation.” Jeff Solomon, “Gertrude Stein, Opium Queen: Notes on a Mistaken Embrace,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): 17. In her “Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein,” 290, Cecire has also traced the perception of Stein’s labor as bodily, from her early critics through to Janet Malcolm.

²³ Gertrude Stein, “Patriarchal Poetry,” in *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces (1913–1927)*, Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein, vol. 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 259.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

construct a new and nonoppressive language.²⁶ The poem's effect rests on scrambling the logic with which we ordinarily see and experience the world, with all its oppressions, and in doing so to offer a new view of it and a new way of inhabiting it.

In the mid-1930s, after her visit to the United States, money came to occupy Stein in a more explicit way. Herbert Hoover remained committed to the supposedly curative powers of the gold standard, but in 1933 Roosevelt moved the U.S. dollar from the gold standard to the silver standard. This was a critical move for the country's economic recovery, but it wiped out 40 percent of Stein's income from her family's investments.²⁷ After her lecture tour, in 1936, she wrote a series of essays for the *Saturday Morning Post* that deal with money. The essays reveal an extraordinary disconnection from the realities of the Depression: in "Still More about Money," for example, she heavily equates unemployment with laziness and frames this complaint around a story in which she and Toklas have difficulty finding a domestic servant.²⁸ But the essays also show Stein using the language of "Patriarchal Poetry" in her meditations on what constitutes money. "Everybody now just has to make up their mind," begins the first essay. "Is money money or isn't money money."²⁹ Part of this is an effort to untangle the difference between money's abstract and its practical identity. Stein puts it this way in *Everybody's Autobiography*:

Gradually I began writing little things about is money money or isn't money money. I was kind of worried about the fact that money is always voted in round numbers so many millions billions and when it is gathered by taxes it is always little sums or big sums but always uneven sums, my eldest brother had always done all that for me and now I was paying it myself he having gone to California and I was finding it surprising, how could so many uneven sums make an even one and how could that even sum be paid out again into uneven ones and not leave something the matter. Undoubtedly it does leave something the matter, so I began to think is money money or isn't money money. If the money as any one earns it and spends it is a different money from the money they vote can it ever come to be the same thing which it undoubtedly does, . . .³⁰

We might read this either as simple naivety or as bourgeois insulation from what money means and how it is managed, as well as a decades-long absence from the American financial system. But at the heart of this lies the problem of relating concepts or categories to instances or examples. In this sense the abstraction of money poses the same problem as language, a problem that Stein solved by embracing and transforming conceptual difference into linguistic circularity, as in her trademark phrase "rose is a rose is a rose." "Money is what words are," Stein would write in *The Geographical History of America*, and "words are what money is."³¹ The circularity displayed here,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 263. Ulla E. Dydo, for example, suggests that Stein argues that "patriarchal poetry, along with other hierarchical systems, was dead and needed to be laid to rest." Ulla E. Dydo, "Gertrude Stein: Composition as Meditation," in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (London: Macmillan, 1988), 56. See also Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Money, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 197.

²⁷ France and Britain would abandon the gold standard three years later, in the Tripartite Agreement. See Barry Eichengreen and Peter Temin, "The Gold Standard and the Great Depression," *Contemporary European History* 9, no. 2 (2000): 183–207.

²⁸ Gertrude Stein, "Still More about Money," in *Money* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973) (no page numbers).

²⁹ Gertrude Stein, "Money," in *ibid.* (no page numbers).

³⁰ Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 268.

³¹ Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 193.

as with “rose is a rose is a rose,” “is money money or isn’t money money,” and “making money peaceably and making money peaceably,” is a meditation, in Michael Davidson’s words, on “language and its ability to claim permanence when based on a series of arbitrary relations.”³² Stein understood money as an abstraction that, like words, held a false claim to permanence, and it is this permanence and solidity, which smooth possible difference into univocal meaning, that her writing engages.³³

IF MONEY IS ABOUT

I want to look now at Stein’s writing from the early 1930s, just before the publication of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and her return to the United States, and to examine how her poetry relates to money, however obliquely, in this pivotal moment in her career. In 1932, the same year Stein penned the *Autobiography*, she wrote another book that is so different in kind that we might find it hard to believe that they were written by the same person. *Stanzas in Meditation* is a 250-page poem that represents the peak of Stein’s experiments with grammar and abstraction. Where the *Autobiography* is full of literary gossip and excitement, *Stanzas in Meditation* is long, repetitive, and only rarely includes anything like narrative description. Unlike the large print run of the *Autobiography*, *Stanzas* was published only in excerpts in niche publications and never appeared in full in Stein’s lifetime; there is little mention of it in her letters to friends. If the *Autobiography* was designed with fame and profit in mind, *Stanzas* negotiates the politics and labor of privacy. It did not sell; it was not even printed in an edition that *could* be sold until after Stein’s death. One book is outward facing; the other looks resolutely inward, both in its mapping of the contours of intimate relationships alongside the process of a mind thinking, or “meditating,” and in its form, which is knottier and less penetrable than perhaps anywhere else in Stein’s oeuvre. The poem consists for the most part of mono- and disyllabic words and relies on a limited set of pronouns: “they,” “she,” “I.” It often thinks about love and loving: “Out from the whole wide world I chose thee,” we read, and later, “Full well I know that she is there.”³⁴ It also describes plants, fruit, and scenery (“the pale sky with the pale green leaves”; 1.10.71), occasionally moves into Wordsworthian lyricism (“This May in unison / All out of cloud. Come hither”; 1.6.65–66), and contains brief moments of narrative, quickly moving on from these narrative fragments rather than dwelling on them or mining them for interpretive potential. The composition of the poem, just before the beginning of Stein’s celebrity proper and her ensuing crisis, marks the final point in her career when she was writing without being subject to public examination. Moreover, as Ulla E. Dydo has shown, the notebooks in which the poem was composed were the site of a dialogue between Toklas and Stein, and in this way the poem navigates the politics of privacy and intimacy.³⁵

³² Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 59.

³³ Lisa Ruddick makes this point: “Univocal meaning, according to Stein, is one of the illusions and oppressions of patriarchal thinking” (*Reading Gertrude Stein*, 197).

³⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 1.8.69, 2.1.80. Subsequent citations will list section, stanza, and page number parenthetically.

³⁵ Ulla E. Dydo has traced the extraordinary textual history of the poem and its alterations by Toklas, apparently out of jealousy toward Stein’s recently discovered early relationship with May Bookstaver, documented in *Q.E.D.* See Ulla E. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–34* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

In the poem's abstracted landscape, in which it rarely settles on an identifiable or solid topic, it makes frequent use of the language of the market. We find references to price, accounting, and exchange throughout the early parts of the poem. "All may be sold for which they have more seeds than theirs" we read in the poem's fourth stanza. "All may be completely added not only by themselves" (1.4.61). In an immediate sense, the "seeds" might remind us that this was a poem written in the French countryside, but they also call to mind some premodern medium of exchange, and unlike a banknote, for example, seeds have an organic relationship with nature. Even so, the poem confounds the logic of buying and adding that its language seems to offer us: "All may be sold for which they have more seeds than theirs" circles back on itself with its repeated pronouns, as does the syntactically similar line that follows. We can see something similar at work in stanza 11:

But which it is not by that they are rich
 But only for it not only when they may count
 Or by the opening that they will go round
 As having value for which they may plan more
 In which they can attract a celebration
 Of their own cause not only just as well as all absurd
 Can they be awakened because they have not heard
 Or may they come to account as much as not abandon
 By the time that they caused them not to blame (1.11.72–73)

Rich, count, value, account: in this associative chain, Stein makes use of the language with which we structure our financial and economic lives. The first line indicates an alternative measure of wealth; if they are not rich by "that," then we can assume that they must be rich by something else. What this alternative measure consists of is left unstated, and we move quickly to the next line. That crucial final word, "count," is also left ambiguous and might suggest counting in either its numerical sense or its sense of being significant, which would relate to the "value" two lines later. We find similar uses later in the stanza: "they could always please / More than just by their count," we are told. The nominal version of count here takes on a numerical value, but once again that number is left unspecified. This is clearly a very different way of using the language of money and exchange than the solid ethical importance that Stein attached to it in her early prose. *Stanzas* is an exercise in thought and concentrated thinking, and one story it tells is, we might suggest, about the dominance of capital over all aspects of life, how even our thinking is done in market terms. But in their ambiguities and slippages the poems undercut the usefulness of that kind of thinking. In this way, they point out the fragility and inadequacy of our collective social language and highlight the abstraction embedded in terms that we assume to have some kind of permanence of meaning and importance.

Much later in *Stanzas*, money appears in the poem more directly:
 I had no doubt that it a difference makes
 If there is doubt if money is about
 I also know but which I know or worry
 If when they give and take they give in a hurry (5.16.189)

We might read the lines “it a difference makes / If there is doubt if money is about” as referring to anxiety about having money and perhaps as an acknowledgment of the difference in experience that money accords. These lines echo two lines from “Lifting Belly,” a fifty-page poem written between 1915 and 1917: “Does it make any difference if you pay for paper or not. / Listen to me. Using old automobile tires as sandals is singularly interesting.”³⁶ Stein’s internal rhyme insists on the relationship between “pay” and “paper,” both bringing out the use of paper as money and reminding us that this is a line about the conditions that make writing possible. The next line designates thrift and reuse as “singularly interesting,” a description that suggests novelty and fascination. Those two lines circle around newness and novelty, locating novelty in the old and reused. In the lines from *Stanzas*, Stein enfoldes the question of whether money is present into the language of anxiety, of doubt, worry, and speculation, which prefigures her uncertainty toward money throughout the 1930s. Soon after the lines above, the stanza returns to one of Stein’s often-repeated superstitions. “I have said that if a cuckoo calls / When moneys in a purse in my own pocket / It means wealth” (5.16.191). Stein refers to this superstition several times in her writing from the 1930s and 1940s. She outlines its meaning in *The Geographical History of America*: “The cuckoo when he says cuckoo and you have money in your pocket and it is the first cuckoo you have heard that year you will have money all that year.”³⁷ She returned to it again in *Ida*, just after the passage I quoted earlier about desiring a publisher:

She went out it was the spring and she sat upon the grass with a little money in her pocket and the cuckoo saw her sitting and knew she had a little money and it went up to her close up to her and sat on a tree and said cuckoo at her, cuckoo cuckoo, cuckoo, and she said, Oh, a cuckoo bird is singing on a cuckoo tree singing to me oh singing to me. And the cuckoo sang cuckoo cuckoo and she sang cuckoo cuckoo to it, and there they were singing cuckoo she to it and it to her.

Then she knew that it was true and that she would be rich and love would not leave her and she would have all three money and love and a cuckoo in a tree, all three.³⁸

Ida’s triple repetition “cuckoo cuckoo cuckoo” echoes the repetition “money money money”; their trochees fold back into one another. Stein’s cuckoo is closely related to her writing; it is something like a lyric songbird or nightingale, whose presence heralds effectual composition and whose absence forestalls the same. The cuckoo superstition becomes a stand-in for making money from writing. In that sense, it both mysticizes money, moving it from the realm of the social and political to the superstitious, and speaks to an underlying anxiety about the presence of money and its impact on the poem’s composition. We can detect a concern about unpredictability in the superstition: the cuckoo arrives; one does not call it. We might then read Stein’s 1930s and 1940s reliance on the cuckoo, and her increasing superstitiousness more broadly, as a response to the social and economic uncertainty of the financial collapse and, later, of the Second World War. But the cuckoo increasingly comes to suggest more than financial anxiety: it indicates an anxiety about the nature of money, as something beyond understanding or control.

³⁶ Stein, “Lifting Belly,” in *Bee Time Vine*, 80.

³⁷ Stein, *Geographical History of America*, 137. Stein became more superstitious—and more mystical—late in her career, repeatedly drawing on this superstition about the cuckoo but also taking an avid interest in prophecies and fortune-telling.

³⁸ Stein, *Ida*, 683.

ONE ONE AND TWO TWO ONE

Still, the rewards of reading *Stanzas in Meditation* only for its few direct references to money are, I think, thin. Most of the time *Stanzas* does not speak directly about money, but across the entire poem Stein thinks through number, counting, and measurement. In this final section I want to suggest that closer attention to the poem's negotiation of number will allow us to better understand Stein's sense of her poetic and intellectual labor.

Stein's *Stanzas* has two dominant modes, we might call one of them experiential and the other conceptual/categorical. The first describes immediate sensory impressions. We find lines like "It is very often very strange / How hands smell of woods / And hair smells of tobacco / And leaves smell of tea or flowers" (2.1.81) and "Even in the rain they cut the hay" (3.20.130). This mode describes things seen, felt, or encountered. It forms the most lyrical and concrete parts of the poem but tends to occur only in single lines or in short sections. The poem's other mode is to think through categories and concepts. Thus, "Even in the rain they cut the hay" is followed by "Hay and straw are not synonymous" (3.20.130), a line that brings out the slight difference—hay is made from grass, straw from wheat or barley—between two words that are often used interchangeably or inaccurately. Most often, this kind of categorical thinking is done in the poem's long stretches that work through number and numerical categories and that turn their attention not to the external or visual world but to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Take, for example, stanza 6 in the poem's first section. This stanza describes a public celebration, presumably a wedding. "It is the day when we remember two. / We two remember two two who are thin / Who are fat with glory too with two." Stein's habit of playing homophones off one another—too/two, won/one—undercuts the apparent stability of number words. This is an instability reflected in the quick slippage from thin to fat, without explanation or apparent causality. The stanza ends on a similar note of indeterminacy:

All who come will will come or come to be
 Come to be coming that is in and see
 See elegantly not without enjoin
 See there there where there is no share
 Shall we be three I wonder now (1.6.66)

"Enjoin" is an important word in this context, for this is a stanza that focuses on the change from one to two and then, in the final line, three. I read this as an attempt to sift through our available categories of being: either as one, a solitary individual; or two, a couple; or three, a love triangle, a couple and their child, a couple and their pet, with all the emotional or experiential uncertainty that the addition of another figure might entail. The poem thus works through the language and categories with which we organize and understand our lives; categories that are primarily numerical. If, as I suggested earlier, the poem points to the ways we quantitatively describe our personal lives, it also shows these modes of description to be insufficient unless carefully worked through.

The difference between one, two, and three is a recurrent theme throughout the poem: "Two and one make two for you / And so they need a share of happiness / How are ours about to be one two or not three," Stein tells us later (4.11.148). "It is so much that there is no difference in so much. / One one and two two one" (3.1.108). Stein beside Toklas is one of two, just as the poem itself is one half of a pair: "This is her autobiography one of two" (4.14.152); the other autobiography is the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. At its most meditative, the poem thinks through the boundaries

of the self in relation to number. Stanza 9 in the poem's fourth section begins "How nine / Nine is not mine / Mine is not nine" (4.9.146). After its nursery rhyme beginning (we hear shades of "how now, brown cow" in "how nine"), the stanza proceeds in short lines, most consisting of two, three, or four words. "Ten is not nine," it continues, "Mine is not ten / nor when / Nor which one then." The stanza works at first in a negative mode, first defining what is not mine and extracting "mine" and "nine" from one another. "Nine" and "mine," like hay and straw, are similar, not this time in sense, but in sound, and their difference has to be slowly worked through and established. Later the stanza shifts into a positive mode: "Mine is one time." It tells us, "I like it too to be one of one two / one two or one or two / one and one / one mine." The poem shuttles between a limited set of monosyllabic words, "one" and "two," "too" and "mine." Stein's limited lexicon has the effect, not of bursting open the bounds of our vocabulary, but of confounding the meanings of our most frequently used words and, crucially, their order. Stein rejects linear progression as inadequate both to experience and to thought. Like the phrase "is money money," the intralinguistic repetitive structure of "one and one" collapses back in upon itself. It creates a sealed text, one that converts public language to private. Still, the stanza ends positively—"I find I like what I have / Very much" (4.9.147)—and part of this satisfaction is the sealed space the poem has constructed. The poem labors to make sense of one, two, and three, and by the end of the poem Stein reassures us that "I wish once more to say that I know the difference between two" (5.80.248). "These stanzas are now done," it concludes abruptly soon thereafter, having completed its task.

Stanzas describes an intellectual labor and affords us, as Dydo suggests, a way of witnessing the mind at work.³⁹ The poem's effect stems not from the close reading of small segments but from experiencing its duration and how it works through thoughts over time. It also works through numbers, in that it both thinks in a numerical sense and seems to reflect constantly on the usefulness of doing so. The antilinearity of this thinking, its refusal to adhere to or follow structural logic, as well as the well-documented queerness of the relationship that Stein is describing in these stanzas, can be difficult to situate alongside anything like capitalist work discipline or management or the ways we organize our lives in general—the social and economic structures that are defined and reinforced through language and number.⁴⁰ The poem thus gives us a labor that refuses to think of itself in capital's terms but that nevertheless insists on itself as constituting a serious form of intellectual work.⁴¹ This is an inward-looking, domestic, and intimate labor, and in this sense it is incompatible with the large, shared, "impersonal" dynamics of the wage and the market and, more broadly, the accepted standards of measurement and quantity that define our shared experience under capitalism.

Unlike some of her modernist peers, Stein's labor is not explicitly or self-consciously artisanal; she does not seek to resuscitate the vocabularies and structures of craft or craftsmanship in order to characterize poetic labor as antithetical to industry or manufacture. In her repetitions, she works with an aesthetic that we might find, at least at first glance, to echo mechanical or mass production. But at the same time, she constantly undermines the logic of this production in the unsettled textures of her poetry's form. Stein never again returned to the poetics of *Stanzas*;

³⁹ Dydo writes, "What we hear in the meditations is the process of consciousness constructing speech" ("Gertrude Stein: Composition as Meditation," 42).

⁴⁰ For a recent reading of Stein's queerness, see Astrid Lorange, "Queering," in *How Reading Is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 126–41. See also Will Fisher on queerness and counterfeiting and economic fraud: "Queer Money," *ELH* 66, no. 1 (1999): 1–23.

⁴¹ Here I am indebted to Cecire's argument: "Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein," 304.

possibly this kind of writing became impossible after the success of the *Autobiography*. But this long poem, still underread even in the Stein canon, comes as close as she ever did to a thorough examination of how capital structures our lives. A