

Baby Woojums in Iowa

BRUCE KELLNER

Among the unique holdings in the Special Collections of the University of Iowa Library is the manuscript—actually three successive typescript drafts with holograph revisions—of Carl Van Vechten's obituary for Gertrude Stein. Although not his final tribute to "a great writer, a great thinker, a great conversationalist, and a great woman,"¹ it is probably the only item out of the vast collection of materials connected with the two writers not sheltered either in the New York Public Library, to which Van Vechten gave most of his papers, or in the Yale University Library, to which Stein gave all of hers. When, in 1947, the Special Collections requested manuscripts from various Iowa authors, Van Vechten donated the piece he had most recently completed, "An Epilogue," as he titled it, to a friend. It is worth preserving in permanent form to mark one of the most fruitful literary associations in modern letters, and Iowa, perhaps, is not an altogether surprising repository.

The long alliance between Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten began in 1913, when they first met in Paris, although he had already written about her. As a reporter for the *New York Times*, he tried unsuccessfully to place an accolade with the Sunday magazine editor, then with *Bookman*, then with the *Sunday World*, then with his friend Pitts Sanborn for whom he occasionally wrote reviews in the *Evening Globe*. Finally the article appeared, unsigned, in the Monday morning issue of the *Times* on the financial page, on February 24. The delay was propitious: the 1913 exhibition at the Sixty-ninth Armory opened then, introducing America to Matisse and Picasso and other post-impressionist painters Gertrude Stein had been collecting for several years. Carl Van Vechten's headline called his subject a "Cubist of Letters."

¹ "More Laurels for our Gertrude," *Gertrude Stein Catalog* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1964.)

How much of the piece was Van Vechten's and how much information had come from Mabel Dodge Luhan—then Mabel Dodge—is difficult to determine. A couple of years later, writing about Gertrude Stein's influence on several younger writers and the Stein *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*, Van Vechten recounted his first visit to the Dodge apartment at 23 Fifth Avenue: "While I drank whiskey and soda—I suffered with a bad cold—Mabel walked up and down, smoking a cigarette, and it was much easier for her to advise me to take a Turkish bath than it was for her to talk about Gertrude Stein."² But in his *New York Times* article, he quoted Mabel Dodge as an anonymous "friend who has made an attempt at understanding" Gertrude Stein's baffling work, and he quoted her at a length only accurate through stenography—which he did not take. Whether the other observations were Van Vechten's or Mabel Dodge's filtered through him, they were the first to be published in America about Gertrude Stein, save a few reviews of *Three Lives*, following its private publication in 1909. Gertrude Stein, the "friend" declared, was tired of "the limitations of literature" and demanded "either a refinement of the intelligence or a blunting of it," and Hutchins Hapgood, another writer present during the interview, called the work "literature with the objective and dramatic points of view left out." Van Vechten himself concluded that "Miss Stein has now evidently forgotten how to write."³

Mabel Dodge sent the piece to Gertrude Stein who, shortly before and shortly after its arrival, knew Carl Van Vechten's name: before, when a friend brought Van Vechten's ex-wife around to complain over the failure of her marriage—which did not interest Gertrude Stein very much—and after, when Van Vechten wrote ahead for an interview—which did interest her. "He wants me to tell him about myself," she wrote to Mabel Dodge. "I hope I will be satisfactory. He is coming on Saturday."⁴ Then, in a coincidence that later delighted them both, Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten met again before they met, at the second performance of Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring*. In his memorable account of that wild premiere Carl Van Vechten remem-

² "The Origin of the Sonnets from the Patagonian," *Hartwick Review*, 3 (Spring, 1967), p. 53.

³ "Cubist of Letters Writes New Book," *New York Times*, 24 February 1913. This article appeared only in the early Monday morning edition and is not included in the available microfilm editions of the *New York Times*. The only known copy is contained in a scrapbook in the Carl Van Vechten Collection in the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library.

⁴ Quoted in Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Movers and Shakers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 35.

bered he had shared his box with “three ladies.”⁵ Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and the actress Florence Bradley shared theirs with “a tall well-built young man, he might have been a dutchman, a scandinavian or an american and he wore a soft evening shirt with the tiniest pleats all over the front of it.”⁶

Later that evening Gertrude Stein wrote a portrait of the unknown young man, called *One*. There was little to associate with *The Rites of Spring*, but the shirt put in an appearance as a “touching white shining sash” or “a touching piece of elastic” or in “the best most silk and water much, in the best most silk.”⁷ Carl Van Vechten later referred to this “portrait” as a “play,” written in “a manner which even her former ardent admirers have not followed her into. . . . Miss Stein is not explanatory, and relies on her audiences to follow her.”⁸ After they finally met, he had no trouble following her for the rest of her life, and long after it for the rest of his own.

On Saturday, Carl Van Vechten called at 27 rue de Fleurus, an address already celebrated because of the paintings Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo had collected there. The long friendship began uneasily, even though the ruffled shirt which he wore again gave them something with which to start: Gertrude Stein teased him with sly and even indecorous suggestions about the breakup of his marriage; Alice Toklas, exotic and waspish, seemed suspicious of him; and Hélène, usually an excellent cook, served a long series of cold hors d'oeuvres for dinner, followed only by a sweet omelette. Van Vechten came away bewildered, but he was convinced of Stein's genius by the end of the evening. Some time would pass, however, before she was persuaded to accept his sincerity. Since he was a friend of Mabel Dodge—with whom by that time Gertrude Stein had begun to grow disenchanted, with some urging presumably from Alice Toklas—Carl Van Vechten might be in the enemy camp with her brother Leo, also a friend of Mabel Dodge. Gertrude Stein had recently broken with him, transferring her 30-year dependence from him to Alice Toklas; and Alice Toklas, in her turn, was easily made jealous, apparently with good reason.

Certainly Carl Van Vechten was aware of Gertrude Stein's magnetism, and more than one other writer has echoed his admission that it was highly sexual. Given his androgynous sensibilities, however, he

⁵ *Music after the Great War* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1915), p. 88.

⁶ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933), pp. 167-68.

⁷ *Geography and Plays* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1922), pp. 199-200.

⁸ “The New York Stage Society,” *New York Press*, 8 February 1914.

was not sexually drawn to any of the women he knew at that period, although Mabel Dodge later flattered herself that he pretended he was. The exception, of course, was the Russian actress, Fania Marinoff, with whom he was deeply in love from 1912 when they met, and to whom he was devoted for the 50 years of their married life. If the Stein-Toklas relationship was equally strong, Van Vechten learned something of its genesis later in the summer, visiting Mabel Dodge in Italy. He met Leo Stein and his mistress Nina Auzias at Stettignano, the latter of whom explained it, again filtered through Mabel Dodge. Leo had told his sister and her friend "that any manifestation of homosexuality of any kind annoyed him and he asked them to refrain . . . as they were *accustomed* to being rather careless in their affection before him," so Van Vechten recorded the conversation in a brief journal he kept that summer. "It sickened me to see the weaker nature getting the better of the stronger," Leo Stein had averred. Alice Toklas, he claimed, was "a stupid girl," and he predicted that "'some day she will do harm to Gertrude.'"⁹ Perhaps, Van Vechten came to believe, Alice Toklas's fierce possessiveness had contributed to Gertrude Stein's limited social horizon, even her isolation, but ultimately the writing had benefitted from it. If Alice Toklas was "a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs,"¹⁰ her industry and single-minded devotion created the milieu in which Gertrude Stein could listen, could think, could write. Leo Stein told Mabel Dodge that "Gertrude was growing helpless and foolish . . . and less inclined to do anything for herself,"¹¹ and, long afterward, Carl Van Vechten wrote that he had "no belief that she can cook an egg, or sew on a button, or even place a postage stamp of the correct denomination on an envelope."¹² But listening was crucial for Gertrude Stein—in Thornton Wilder's phrase, she was "an impassioned listener to life"¹³—and so was thinking: "It takes a lot of time to be a genius," she once observed, "you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing."¹⁴ For Carl Van Vechten, such

⁹ Carl Van Vechten Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

¹⁰ Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, pp. 309-10.

¹¹ Quoted in Mabel Dodge Luhan, *European Experiences* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 327.

¹² "Introduction," in Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (New York: The Modern Library, 1933), p. viii.

¹³ "Introduction," in Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. xxvii.

¹⁴ *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 70.

statements never supported the frequent, later charges against Gertrude Stein of egoism; they were transparently true for him.

If his first visit had gone badly, the second one, a year later, went beautifully well, in part of course because Stein could receive him, knowing she had not only a staunch admirer but an unpaid American press agent. During the interim, Van Vechten had dropped her name in several of his columns for the *New York Press* where he had become drama critic, and he had written a full-scale explication. "How to Read Gertrude Stein" appeared shortly after the publication of her *Tender Buttons*, which Van Vechten had asked Stein to allow his friend, the poet Donald Evans, to print through his recently established Claire-Marie Press. "How to Read Gertrude Stein" was published in the August issue of *Trend*, groping for analogies with music and painting, declaring that because "hypocrisy and evasion" marked the English language "how not to say a thing has been the problem of our writers from the earliest times," describing the Stein-Toklas ménage without mentioning the latter, and attempting to generate some interest in *Three Lives*, in the *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*, and in *Tender Buttons*.¹⁵

Shortly before his article appeared, Carl Van Vechten wrote to Gertrude Stein that he was back in Paris "with the latest gossip" and wanted to "bring over a little Russian called Fania."¹⁶ He and Fania Marinoff had been travelling in England and were enroute to Venice; they reached Paris just in time for a visit, because Stein and Toklas were scheduled to leave for England the following day. The familiar stories about Gertrude Stein taking on the men while Alice Toklas huddled with the wives and mistresses in a corner had not yet begun, nor were they then true. In 1913, when Van Vechten first called, the break between brother and sister was under way; in 1914, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas had not yet entirely defined the roles they were to play in their 40-year relationship. Gertrude Stein may have been "a very clever woman," as he told Fania Marinoff, but Alice Toklas still carried a good deal of her own authority. Carl Van Vechten was not entirely at ease about the coming encounter, but it proved sufficiently successful for him to record it in some considerable detail in a journal he kept that summer. "Remember . . . not to talk too much," he cautioned Fania Marinoff, but she laughed and said she had promptly decided to repeat the remark. In the end, Van Vechten him-

¹⁵ *Trend* (August 1914), pp. 553-54.

¹⁶ *The Flowers of Friendship / Letters Written to Gertrude Stein*, ed. Donald Gallup (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 97.

self repeated it when he discovered how well she got on with Stein and Toklas.¹⁷

Several alterations had occurred since Van Vechten's initial visit. The apartment and studio had been connected with a passageway, and Leo Stein's "door in the wall was plastered up." Matisse and Renoir had disappeared with Leo, but Picasso and Cézanne remained, and there were "some new things in the dining room by a new Spanish painter, Juan Gris." Indeed, Spain had become a strong influence "because Spanish things are cheap in Paris just now" and, no doubt, because the Stein-Toklas holiday there had motivated *Tender Buttons* and other recent work. Stein herself had not changed: "the same face of the intellectual Jewess, the same brown corduroy skirt with a nondescript shirtwaist—and breasts dropping low over her belt—and carpet slippers." Nor had Toklas changed: "Her dresses, plain straight hanging . . . of Indian stamped cotton, with sleeves of lace," but her "remarks were catlike—another formula on every one to follow. The Russian dancers used vulgar colors, which had influenced the French who had good taste to which they were returning; she was tired of George Moore, because he was too respectable; she couldn't bear Yvette Guilbert—or Pavlova." Van Vechten must have emerged from the visit with a sore tongue from biting it; Alice Toklas had attacked nearly all of his present enthusiasms.

They spoke primarily, however, about *Tender Buttons*, probably the first time Gertrude Stein ever tried to explain what she had attempted to achieve in that curious composition: "I tried to get a combination of sound and picture that would make the effect," Van Vechten recorded her saying. "I worked over them awfully hard, and I think I succeeded." She liked the look of Donald Evans's book, took the blame for the typographical errors—since Evans was boasting that there were none—and she explained the title. Still under dispute in recent years, when Virgil Thomson and Paul Padgette and a rather less cognizant Stein admirer took each other to task in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, the title gave its author no difficulties at all: "You see, I love buttons. I often go to the Bon Marché and buy strings of them, so symbolically they seemed to connect themselves with the three headings of these poems."

Then they got down to gossip: Mabel Dodge had not wanted her to publish with "a degenerate" like Donald Evans, whom Edwin Arlington Robinson didn't like, but Gertrude Stein thought Robinson was "a Presbyterian poet" on painter Marsden Hartley's advice, and she "put

¹⁷ Carl Van Vechten Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

all Mabel's acts up to femininity." As for John Reed, Mabel Dodge's current lover, he was "'a very ordinary college type, whose billionaire ties are his weakness,'" and she had little use for any other of the current Dodge entourage, since "'you can go to the Café du Dôme and pick up a hundred such any time you want them.'"

Later, Stein showed Van Vechten her "Preciosilla" and "Susie Asado"—which he read aloud for her—based on dancers she had "put down after her trip to Spain last year." The first "had cost her countless visits to her model": "'We went to see her dance numberless times before I caught her rhythm.'"

They spoke, too, about Jews, and of Gertrude Stein's theory that Abraham Lincoln's parentage had "a Jewish strain, which she said would explain many things in his career," which led Fania Marinoff to contend that "all men of genius had Jewish blood," and Van Vechten, the only alien among them, agreed there might even be a book in the idea. It was a good visit. Even Hélène behaved, giving them "a very good luncheon with a most excellent chicken."

In later years, Van Vechten had entirely forgotten this encounter, claiming that his note to Stein had reached her, apparently, after she and Toklas had already returned from their trip to England. Doubtless, a complete chronological ordering of Van Vechten's various fugitive journals, appointment books, and other unpublished private accounts will one day offer further assistance in coming to terms with Gertrude Stein's work.

The two writers did not meet again for nearly 14 years. By that time, Carl Van Vechten had forsaken criticism for fiction, music in the concert halls for blues in Harlem cabarets, and at least some of his aesthetic decorum for the roar of what he later called the "Splendid Drunken Twenties."¹⁸ *Peter Whiffle*, *The Blind Bow-Boy*, *The Tattooed Countess*, *Nigger Heaven*, and other novels had given him a considerable popular audience. During the same period of time, Gertrude Stein had published only two new books—a hermetic volume, *Geography and Plays*, in America at her own expense, and *The Making of Americans* in a small edition in Paris—and several pieces in sympathetic periodicals like *Rogue* and *Vanity Fair*, many of them accepted through Van Vechten influence. He was not alone in this endeavor, of course. Sherwood Anderson and Henry McBride and others offered substantial assistance in keeping Gertrude Stein's name before the public during those difficult years, but no one else so resolutely championed her cause.

¹⁸ "How I Remember Joseph Hergesheimer," *Fragments from an Unwritten Autobiography*, I (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1955), p. 3.

In "Medals for Miss Stein," a review of *Geography and Plays*, he got into print a good deal of information about her total output to that time, and he got it into print where it would receive wide attention, in the book section of the *New York Tribune*. In his enthusiasm, he ascribed her influence rather widely to Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Zona Gale, May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Waldo Frank, and Sherwood Anderson, claiming that the influence would appear "axiomatic" in a few years even if at present it might seem "to many a little hysterical." The argument that followed remains fairly secure, however, because it still makes the best one against Gertrude Stein's detractors: "The scoffers handicap themselves by not having prepared their case. They have not read Gertrude Stein, or if they have it will be found that they have perused only a few of the more famous extracts. . . . [which] savor, to the uninitiate, of dark cocoonery." Then, after accounting for her various manners, he concluded it was "pleasant to remember that when the world stops laughing at Miss Stein it can still laugh with her."¹⁹

Through the whole of the 14 years that separated their first and second meetings, they had sent mutual friends to see each other, and Fania Marinoff had certainly seen Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas in Paris on one of her European holidays. But Gertrude Stein "was a little worried" about seeing Carl Van Vechten after such a long time, and she told him so when he arrived. "I wasn't, said Carl."²⁰ Accounting for the friendship many years later, Donald Gallup quoted Stein's first letter to Van Vechten after he returned to America, which indicated she need not have been worried either: "We loved each other very much by correspondence but there is even more of it face to face."²¹

To commemorate their reunion, Gertrude Stein wrote a second portrait of Carl Van Vechten, in her manner of that period, now and then evoking the occasion: "If it was to be a prize a surprise if it was to be a surprise to realise, if it was to be if it were to be, was it to be. What was it to be. It was to be what it was. And it was. So it was. As it was. As it is. Is it as it as. It is and as it is and as it is. And so and so as it was."²² Much of the portrait, however, reflects her preoccupations of the time, and it even copies various locutions suggestive of the opera

¹⁹ "Medals for Miss Stein," May 13, 1923, p. 1.

²⁰ Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, pp. 306-07.

²¹ "Carl Van Vechten's Gertrude Stein," *Yale University Library Gazette*, 27 (October 1952), p. 82.

²² "Van or Twenty Years After," *Morrow's Almanac for the Year of Our Lord 1928* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1927), p. 81.

libretto, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, she had given to Virgil Thomson to set to music.

In return, Van Vechten arranged for Thomson to play his score at the Van Vechten-Marinoff apartment on West 55th Street in New York for a number of influential people; and when the opera was produced a few years later he wrote an introduction for its first publication, an essay for its souvenir program, and an open letter in the *New York Times*. Further, he continued to try to interest publishers in Gertrude Stein's epic, *The Making of Americans*. By an irony in timing, he had just convinced Bennett Cerf to bring it out in a Modern Library Giant when Gertrude Stein signed a contract with Harcourt, Brace and Company for an abridged version. The Modern Library did bring out an edition of *Three Lives*, however, and Van Vechten's long introduction could not have been more helpful to the "uninitiates" of whom he had spoken earlier. It is a model of the familiar Van Vechten essay, warm and persuasive, built on the good gossip of personal incident, charming the reader to consider the most recondite material. By the time he announces, toward his conclusion, that *Three Lives* is a masterpiece or "an authentic milestone on the long road of American letters," nobody easily doubts him.²³

Until that time—the mid-thirties—the friendship between the two had been carried on almost entirely by mail. Indeed, over four hundred letters from Gertrude Stein to Carl Van Vechten, and many more than that number from him to her, are now in their collections at Yale University. Closer relationships—closer in geographical proximity—did not easily survive for Gertrude Stein. Carl Van Vechten often declared he was the only person with whom she never quarrelled, and one of the few with whom she never broke. There were others, of course—Sherwood Anderson, Louis Bromfield, Bennett Cerf, Janet Flanner, for example—but friendships often simply terminated. Nearly always, more recent biographical studies suggest, Alice Toklas was responsible, dismissing people by telephone, by letter, by direct refusals at the door of 27 rue de Fleurus. Van Vechten, on the other hand, working seemingly out of admiration and affection for her in America, and with nothing whatever to gain, saw Gertrude Stein rarely but loved her and her work from the fortunate distance. Later he said that the distance probably accounted for the tranquility of their relationship. Certainly he never lacked in artistic temperament himself, and plenty of evidence stands against him during his own long career. However, he grew through the years to cultivate indifference; early on he had stop-

²³ "Introduction," p. xi.

ped worrying about what others thought of his behavior and affectations. Perhaps some of his private serenity came to bear on his response to Gertrude Stein and, inevitably, to Alice Toklas. It may be, too, that his marriage to Fania Marinoff and his “dead sweet affectionateness” that manifested itself “in warm friendships for other men,” as Mabel Dodge described it,²⁴ made of him no threat to Alice Toklas.

When the lecture tour had been arranged for the winter of 1934 and 1935, Carl Van Vechten flew over to Bilignin in the south of France, where Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas maintained a summer place, to make photographs on their home territory. He had given up extensive writing in 1930 with a final novel, *Parties*, and had turned to photography as an outlet for his energy, which from the beginning of his various careers had been astonishing. In the garden at Bilignin and in the surrounding countryside, Van Vechten made a series of photographs to rank with his best work: Gertrude Stein from the distance, at close range, sitting, standing, reclining with the dogs Pépé and Basket, reclining alone, in conversation with Alice Toklas, laughing, frowning, hoeing in the garden, looking out over the sweeping vista of the Rhône Valley, even from the rear for a good look at her gray crew-cut. When the boat docked in New York in October he was on hand—Bennett Cerf in tow to see to the luggage—to drive the visitors by Brentano’s, where his photographs and her books were on display in the windows—on their way to the Algonquin Hotel.

After a few initial appearances in the East, Gertrude Stein’s lecture tour took her to Chicago, where Carl Van Vechten flew with her and Alice Toklas for a performance of *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Then his letters followed them all over the Midwest, and when they returned to the East for the Christmas holidays, the three friends began to practice a suggestion Van Vechten had written them early in December: “Dear dear DEAR Woojumses! (pronounced Woo-Jum-Ez, please!)”²⁵ Thereafter, he addressed Gertrude Stein as Baby Woojums and Alice Toklas as Mama Woojums. He was Papa Woojums. These terms of endearment no others ever shared. When the visitors departed for France in the spring, Papa Woojums was on hand to bid them farewell. He and Gertrude Stein never saw each other again, but his efforts in her behalf did not cease.

His portraits of her illustrated several new books. For the Gotham Book Mart’s *We Moderns* catalog of avant garde literature, for which various authors wrote biographical or critical notes for other authors,

²⁴ *Movers and Shakers*, p. 45.

²⁵ *The Flowers of Friendship*, p. 292.

he wrote a paragraph about Gertrude Stein not easily bested for precision and clarity and aphorism:

Gertrude Stein rings bells, loves baskets, and wears handsome waistcoats. She has a tenderness for green glass and buttons have a tenderness for her. In the matter of fame you can only compare her with a moving picture star in Hollywood and three generations of young writers have sat at her feet. She has influenced without coddling them. In her own time she is a legend and in her country she is with honor. Keys to sacred doors have been presented to her and she understands how to open them. She writes books for children, plays for actors, and librettos for operas. She writes fiction and autobiography and criticism of painters. Each one of them is one. For her a rose is a rose and how!²⁶

Moreover, he continued to receive and protect typed copies of all Gertrude Stein's unpublished manuscripts as well as her own copies of magazines and other periodicals in which her work appeared. In 1932, when she and Alice Toklas began the practice of sending them to him, a revolution in France seemed possible; by the end of the decade, with war at hand, it seemed more than ever a wise decision. Van Vechten of course attempted to persuade them to return to America, but they sat out the war in Bilignin, passing as Frenchwomen. He, on the other hand, spent much of his time during the war working as captain of the American Theatre Wing of the Stage Door Canteen, washing dishes and arranging entertainment and documenting the endeavor through his photography. Afterward, following the liberation of France, he was able to communicate fairly steadily with Stein and Toklas and to send them packages—soap and clothing and food—through servicemen he had befriended at the Stage Door Canteen.

The war had weakened Gertrude Stein, however, and, already suffering from cancer, she died just a few months in advance of Carl Van Vechten's most substantial tribute to her. *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* was published in September, 1946, a thick volume of over six hundred pages, in which he had edited a generous sampling of all of her various styles and manners with helpful explanatory notes and an appreciative introduction that began with his Gotham Book Mart paragraph. He appended a note, explaining that his introduction "was written, and sent to the printer a little over three months before Ger-

²⁶ The published version of this paragraph differs slightly from this manuscript version given to Bruce Kellner by Carl Van Vechten.

trude Stein's death in Paris, July 27, 1946, but I feel that it is wiser, for both sentimental and practical reasons, to let it stand unchanged."⁷

His obituary for her came later. The *New York Post* titled it, somewhat tastelessly, "Pigeons and Roses Pass, Alas," and printed it December 9, 1946, with several minor errors. At least one other newspaper—unidentified and undated—reprinted it, reparagraphed and extensively cut, in a version called "Gertrude Stein's 'Now Puzzling God.'" Newspapers are transient, easily forgotten, easily lost; Van Vechten's testament of his devotion deserves preservation and wider availability to admirers of Gertrude Stein's work, and in the state in which he intended it:

GERTRUDE STEIN: AN EPILOGUE

She who was known and loved universally as Gertrude Stein, born at Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1874, now rests in the cemetery of Père Lachaise at Paris, along with Balzac, Oscar Wilde, Daumier, Beaumarchais, Delacroix, Brillat-Savarin, and countless other writers, painters, and musicians. "She has ascended to Paradise," a friend of hers and mine recently observed, "and doubtless is now engaged in puzzling God!"

In spite of advice to the contrary, it is much too early to appraise her work and its value. This is a matter which time alone can take care of. To appraise her personality is a much simpler affair. She was one of the great personages not only of her own epoch but of the seventy odd years which preceded her birth and it is unlikely that any more startling figure will shake the literary world in the Twentieth Century. It is probable, indeed, that the vivid legend which her personality created will trail clouds of glory behind her for a long time to come. The statues, paintings and photographs of her that exist will recreate her ruggedly noble appearance for posterity. Books will be contrived in an attempt to capture her charm, her wit, her intelligence, her warm communication with the spirit of those about her. Elliott Paul has already set it down as his opinion that her talk was as brilliant as the famed talk of Oscar Wilde. Certainly the desire to listen to her was almost a universal trait so far as her friends and acquaintances were concerned, and many of these were very celebrated people indeed. Her beautiful voice in itself was hypnotic enough to give her words a special characteristic; no other voice in Paris, save that of the divine Sarah Bernhardt, has ever evoked more enthusiastic comment,

²⁷ New York: Random House, Inc., p. [xvi].

but if Sarah's voice was golden, Gertrude's was somewhere between the deeper tones of a bell and a 'cello.

She was, it must be generally known by now, convinced that words had lost their meaning. I thought of this when I recently listened to some young people discussing the current language. "Radical" originally meant "basic," it would appear and it seemed highly probable to these boys and girls that "reactionary" in the first instance may have been employed to indicate a subject who reacted to outward stimuli. The somewhat out-of-date Thesaurus on my shelves gives communist as a synonym for mischief-maker, evildoer, oppressor, tyrant, even brute, savage, monster, and scourge of the human race! It is little wonder, considering these and cognate matters, that somebody should decide that the time had come to rename objects on a large scale. That Gertrude Stein's work, or even her design for work, was largely unintelligible to the outer world did not deter her from continuing. Very quickly she discovered (or said that she had discovered) that it was (and is) impossible to arrange words in any order whatever in which they do not make sense, absolutely impossible, and this was an important discovery inasmuch as her idea was to make sense, to be denotative constructively, not, as so many critics believe (and have written that they believe) to express the psychology of the unconscious, not to beguile her own ears and those of her readers with meaningless, even if beautiful, sounds, not, especially NOT, to use words for their associations, their connotations. This is about as much (although she has said and written cryptically a great deal more) as she has ever actually let be known about her work, for the very good reason that long ago she assured herself that her writing needs no explanation. "Read what I have written," she always said to those who demanded a key to the meaning of her work. Reading it is not such an unpleasant chore as some cynical persons would have us believe. It can be, if sympathetically approached, quite the reverse, a most agreeable exercise.

Her indirect influence on contemporary writing has been extensive as has been pointed out on innumerable occasions. She has told us how she has weighed words and studied their values until she was in complete possession of their essence and she has given some other writers the incentive to follow this procedure.

She never confused the language of conversation with the language she invented and experimented with, and there is a great body of her work based on this universal language of conversation

which is open to the casual reader to understand: *Three Lives*, a classic in her own lifetime, *Wars I Have Seen*, *Brewsie and Willie*, much of *The Making of Americans*, and the two autobiographies, "Alice's" and "Everybody's," all of which are most rewarding in one way or another.

Somebody has said that when Gertrude Stein wrote about herself, she easily excelled the attempts of others to write about her. It is further true that she seldom wrote about anything else but herself. One of the reasons that her "difficult" work is hard to understand is that it is almost entirely subjective. It has been said of her that she was an actress who knew her part and played it for all it was worth. This is completely inaccurate. She has always wanted to be understood and appreciated and in the beginning suffered intensely when she was laughed at. She consoled herself by saying: "Nothing is meaningless if one likes to do it," as good a philosophy as any.

In the work of most writers distinct periods can be separated one from the other, but in the work of Gertrude Stein her conversation pieces mixed with her landscape, her gossip with her lectures. All of it was part of her, some of it, no doubt, less well done than the rest, but all of it a kind of testimony to her mind, her temperament, yes, her genius. She may one day stand in marble on a pedestal and watch Paris and the world go by, but in a sense she stood on a pedestal all her life. *Three Lives* would give her a position as a great writer; there is sufficient evidence that she was a great woman as well.

November 7, 1948²⁸

Even here, Carl Van Vechten's duties were hardly complete. Almost immediately following Gertrude Stein's death, Alice Toklas wrote that "Baby told me all over again about a week ago how you had been her most loyal friend from the beginning and how wonderful it was that you had done the perfect introduction [to the *Selected Writings* volume, which Gertrude Stein had read]. . . . Papa Woojums—she said it to me twice—you are to edit the unpublished manuscripts and I am to stay on here."²⁹ A month later, Alice Toklas wrote again, more explicit-

²⁸ This transcription is of the third and final version of "Gertrude Stein: An Epilogue," in the Special Collections of the University of Iowa Library. I have silently corrected obvious errors in spelling and punctuation.

²⁹ *Staying on Alone / Letters of Alice B. Toklas*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Liveright, 1973), pp. 4-6. Printed by permission.

ly: "No Gertrude certainly wanted *everything* to be published. . . . Baby always concentrated on the present—the continuous present—but she certainly meant everything. Baby mentioned it at the hospital—she told me [she] had asked you to do it because she had *all* confidence in you and no one else. . . ."30 Alice Toklas signed herself, as usual, "Mama Woojums."

In quick succession, then, Van Vechten sanctioned publication of several Stein texts, and for one of them, *Last Operas and Plays*, he acted as editor and wrote the introduction; he arranged for reprints or for new appearances in periodicals, for productions of plays; he wrote notes for catalogs and programs; he chronicled their friendship again in his 1952 memoir for the *Yale University Library Gazette* about "Some 'Literary Ladies'" he had known; and of course he continued to supply photographs for use in books and magazines and, later, on television programs. Beginning in 1951, the first of eight substantial volumes was published by the Yale Press, the whole series entitled "The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein, under the general editorship of Carl Van Vechten with an advisory committee of Donald C. Gallup, Donald Sutherland, and Thornton Wilder." Each of the annual volumes carried an introduction by someone connected with Gertrude Stein: Janet Flanner, the *New Yorker's* Genêt, who had known her since the twenties; literary critic Lloyd Frankenberg; Virgil Thomson, who had set several Stein texts to music; Natalie Clifford Barney, leader of *L'Académie des Femmes* whose Paris salon was devoted to women in the arts; Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the noted art dealer from whom Stein had purchased paintings since 1907; Donald Sutherland, author of the first extended work of Stein criticism, *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work*; Donald Gallup, her bibliographer and the curator of American literature at Yale University Library to which Stein donated her papers. Carl Van Vechten wrote the introduction to the final volume in the series, observing that in the beginning "my initial feeling was that Gertrude had bitten off more than I could easily chew."³¹ At its conclusion he addressed himself to the subject of his long chore: "I have only witnessed the ending of one decade since your death, dear Gertrude, but with my advancing years I am quite ready to relinquish my stewardship of your literary affairs, shouting *Salve atque Vale* from my garret window, as I appoint Donald Gallup . . . as my more-than-adequate successor."³²

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Printed by permission.

³¹ "A Few Notes à propos of a 'Little' Novel of Thank You," *A Novel of Thank You* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. vii.

³² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

By that time, 1958, he had presented to Yale his entire collection of Gertrude Stein's work, most of it inscribed; her letters; the manuscript for *Four Saints in Three Acts* which she had given him bound in vellum; everything, indeed, including the famous "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" seal, walking cane, brooches, waistcoats, that Alice Toklas had given as gifts to him and Fania Marinoff. Only a few letters—those dealing with his own books, which went to the New York Public Library—were withheld from Yale.

And the three typescripts for the obituary, which he gave to the University of Iowa's Special Collections. Gertrude Stein always regretted having missed Iowa during the lecture tour—a snow storm in Chicago forced cancellation of her lecture in Iowa City—because the state was Carl Van Vechten's birthplace: "You are brilliant and subtle if you come from Iowa," she wrote in *Everybody's Autobiography*, "and really strange and you live as you live and you are always very well taken care of if you come from Iowa."³³ With Carl Van Vechten's affection for her as a case in point, she might have added that you "always very well" take care of those you love if you come from there.

³³ *Everybody's Autobiography*, p. 224.

I am grateful to Donald Gallup, Literary Trustee for the Estate of Carl Van Vechten, for his permission to quote from unpublished materials by Carl Van Vechten, and to the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library, where the materials are part of the Carl Van Vechten Collection. The excerpts from Carl Van Vechten's unpublished journals and "Gertrude Stein: An Epilogue" are printed with the permission of his Literary Trustee, Donald Gallup; copyright © 1977, Estate of Carl Van Vechten.



Portrait of Gertrude Stein. A photograph by Carl Van Vechten. Courtesy of Joseph Solomon for the Estate of Carl Van Vechten.



Portrait of Carl Van Vechten. A photograph by Carl Van Vechten. Courtesy of Joseph Solomon for the Estate of Carl Van Vechten.