

HAS GERTRUDE STEIN A SECRET?

BY B. F. SKINNER

I

In the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Gertrude Stein tells in the following way of some psychological experiments made by her at Harvard:—

She was one of a group of Harvard men and Radcliffe women and they all lived very closely and very interestingly together. One of them, a young philosopher and mathematician who was doing research work in psychology, left a definite mark on her life. She and he together worked out a series of experiments in automatic writing under the direction of Münsterberg. The result of her own experiments, which Gertrude Stein wrote down and which was printed in the *Harvard Psychological Review*, was the first writing of hers ever to be printed. It is very interesting to read because the method of writing to be afterwards developed in *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* already shows itself.

There is a great deal more in this early paper than Miss Stein points out. It is, as she says, an anticipation of the prose style of *Three Lives* and is unmistakably the work of Gertrude Stein in spite of the conventional subject matter with which it deals. Many turns of speech, often commonplace, which she has since then in some subtle way made her own are already to be found. But there is much more than this. The paper is concerned with an early interest of Miss Stein's that must have been very important in her later development, and the work that it describes cannot reasonably be over-

looked by anyone trying to understand this remarkable person.

Since the paper is hard to obtain, I shall summarize it briefly. It was published in the *Psychological Review* for September 1896 under the title, 'Normal Motor Automatism,' by Leon M. Solomons and Gertrude Stein, and it attempted to show to what extent the elements of a 'second personality' (of the sort to be observed in certain cases of hysteria) were to be found in a normal being. In their experiments the authors investigated the limits of their own normal motor automatism; that is to say, they undertook to see how far they could 'split' their own personalities in a deliberate and purely artificial way. They were successful to the extent of being able to perform many acts (such as writing or reading aloud) in an automatic manner, while carrying on at the same time some other activity such as reading an interesting story.

II

In the experiments with automatic writing, a planchette of the ouija board type was originally used, but as soon as the authors had satisfied themselves that spontaneous writing movements do occur while the attention is directed elsewhere, an ordinary pencil and paper were used instead. The subject usually began by making voluntary random writing movements or by writing the

letter *m* repeatedly. In one experiment this was done while the subject read an interesting story at the same time, and it was found that some of the words read in the story would be written down in an automatic way. At first there was a strong tendency to notice this as soon as it had begun to happen and to stop it, but eventually the words could be written down unconsciously as well as involuntarily. (I shall use Miss Stein's psychological terminology throughout.) 'Sometimes the writing of the word was completely unconscious, but more often the subject knew what was going on. His knowledge, however, was obtained by sensations from the arm. He was conscious that he just had written a word, not that he was about to do so.'

In other experiments the subject read an interesting story as before, and single words were dictated to him to be written down at the same time. These were difficult experiments, but after considerable practice they were successful. The subject was eventually able to write down 'five or six' words spoken by another person, without being conscious of either the heard sounds or the movement of the arm. If his attention were not sufficiently well distracted he might become aware that his hand was writing something. The information came from the arm, not from the sound of the dictated word. 'It is never the sound that recalls us. This, of course, may be an individual peculiarity to a certain extent. . . . Yet, Miss Stein has a strong auditory consciousness, and sounds usually determine the direction of her attention.'

In a third group of experiments the subject read aloud, preferably from an uninteresting story, while being read to from an interesting one. 'If he does not go insane during the first few trials, he will quickly learn to concentrate his

attention fully on what is being read to him, yet go on reading just the same. The reading becomes completely unconscious for periods of as much as a page.' Automatic reading of this sort is probably part of the experience of everyone.

The fourth and last group brings out the relevance of the experiments to the later work of Gertrude Stein. I shall let Miss Stein describe the result.

Spontaneous automatic writing. — This became quite easy after a little practice. We had now gained so much control over our habits of attention that distraction by reading was almost unnecessary. Miss Stein found it sufficient distraction often to simply read what her arm wrote, but following three or four words behind her pencil. . . .

A phrase would seem to get into the head and keep repeating itself at every opportunity, and hang over from day to day even. The stuff written was grammatical, and the words and phrases fitted together all right, but there was not much connected thought. The unconsciousness was broken into every six or seven words by flashes of consciousness, so that one cannot be sure but what the slight element of connected thought which occasionally appeared was due to these flashes of consciousness. But the ability to write stuff that sounds all right, without consciousness, was fairly well demonstrated by the experiments. Here are a few specimens:

'Hence there is no possible way of avoiding what I have spoken of, and if this is not believed by the people of whom you have spoken, then it is not possible to prevent the people of whom you have spoken so glibly. . . .'

Here is a bit more poetical than intelligible:

'When he could not be the longest and thus to be, and thus to be, the strongest.'

And here is one that is neither:

'This long time when he did this best time, and he could thus have been bound, and in this long time, when he could be this to first use of this long time. . . .'

III

Here is obviously an important document. No one who has read *Tender Buttons* or the later work in the same vein can fail to recognize a familiar note in these examples of automatic writing. They are quite genuinely in the manner that has so commonly been taken as characteristic of Gertrude Stein. Miss Stein's description of her experimental result is exactly that of the average reader confronted with *Tender Buttons* for the first time: 'The stuff is grammatical, and the words and phrases fit together all right, but there is not much connected thought.' In short, the case is so good, simply on the grounds of style, that we are brought to the swift conclusion that the two products have a common origin, and that the work of Gertrude Stein in the *Tender Buttons* manner is written automatically and unconsciously in some such way as that described in this early paper.

This conclusion grows more plausible as we consider the case. It is necessary, of course, to distinguish between the Gertrude Stein of *Three Lives* and the *Autobiography* and the Gertrude Stein of *Tender Buttons*, a distinction that is fairly easily made, even though, as we shall see in a moment, there is some of the first Gertrude Stein in the latter work. If we confine ourselves for the present to the second of these two persons, it is clear that the hypothetical author who might be inferred from the writing itself possesses just those characteristics that we should expect to find if a theory of automatic writing were the right answer. Thus there is very little intellectual content discoverable. The reader — the ordinary reader, at least — cannot infer from the writing that its author possesses any consistent point of view. There is seldom any intelligible expression of opinion, and there are enough capricious reversals to

destroy the effect of whatever there may be. There are even fewer emotional prejudices. The writing is cold. Strong phrases are almost wholly lacking, and it is so difficult to find a well-rounded emotional complex that if one is found it may as easily be attributed to the ingenuity of the seeker. Similarly, our hypothetical author shows no sign of a personal history or of a cultural background; *Tender Buttons* is the stream of consciousness of a woman without a past. The writing springs from no literary sources. In contrast with the work of Joyce, to whom a superficial resemblance may be found, the borrowed phrase is practically lacking.

When memorized passages occur, they are humdrum — old saws or simple doggerel recovered from childhood and often very loosely paraphrased: 'If at first you don't succeed try try again,' or 'Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red. . . .' If there is any character in the writing whatsoever, it is due to this savor of the schoolroom, and the one inference about the author that does seem plausible is that she has been to grammar school. Her sentences are often cast as definitions ('What is a spectacle a spectacle is the resemblance . . .' or 'A sign is the specimen spoken') or as copy-book aphorisms ('An excuse is not dreariness, a single plate is not butter,' or 'There is coagulation in cold and there is none in prudence') or as grammatical paradigms ('I begin you begin we begin they began we began you began I began'). This heavy dose of grammar school is especially strongly felt in *An Elucidation*, Miss Stein's first attempt to explain herself, and a piece of writing in which there are many evidences of a struggle on the part of the conscious Gertrude Stein to accept the origin of the *Tender Buttons* manner. Miss Stein

wanted the volume *Lucy Church Amably* to be bound like a schoolbook, but I shall leave it to a more imaginative mind to elaborate this metaphor further.

This is apparently as much of the writing as will help to illuminate the character of the writer. For the rest, it is what Miss Stein describes as sounding all right without making sense. There is no paradox about this, there is no secret about how it is done; but it gives us very little information about the author. Grammar is ever present — that is the main thing. We are presented with sentences ('sentences and always sentences'), but we often recognize them as such only because they show an accepted order of article, substantive, verb, split infinitive, article, substantive, connective, and so on. The framework of a sentence is there, but the words tacked upon it are an odd company. In the simplest type of case we have a nearly intelligible sentence modified by the substitution for a single word of one sounding much the same. This sort of substitution was reported by Miss Stein in connection with her experiments in automatic reading: 'Absurd mistakes are occasionally made in the reading of words — substitutions similar in sound but utterly different in sense.' The reader will recognize it as the sort of slip that is made when one is very tired. In more complex cases it cannot, of course, be shown that the unintelligibility is due to substitution; if most of the words are replaced, we have nothing to show that a word is a slip. We must be content to characterize it, as Miss Stein herself has done: 'We have made excess return to rambling.'

IV

From this brief analysis it is apparent that, although it is quite plausible that the work is due to a second personality

successfully split off from Miss Stein's conscious self, it is a very flimsy sort of personality indeed. It is intellectually unopinionated, is emotionally cold, and has no past. It is unread and unlearned beyond grammar school. It is as easily influenced as a child; a heard word may force itself into whatever sentence may be under construction at the moment, or it may break the sentence up altogether and irremediably. Its literary materials are the sensory things nearest at hand — objects, sounds, tastes, smells, and so on. The reader may compare, for the sake of the strong contrast, the materials of 'Melantha' in *Three Lives*, a piece of writing of quite another sort. In her experimental work it was Miss Stein's intention to avoid the production of a true second personality, and she considered herself to be successful. The automatism she was able to demonstrate possessed the 'elements' of a second personality, it was able to do anything that a second personality could do, but it never became the organized *alter ego* of the hysterical. The superficial character of the inferential author of *Tender Buttons* consequently adds credibility to the theory of automatic authorship.

The Gertrude Stein enthusiast may feel that I am being cruelly unjust in this estimate. I admit that there are passages in *Tender Buttons* that elude the foregoing analysis. But it must be made clear that the two Gertrude Steins we are considering are not kept apart by the covers of books. There is a good deal of the Gertrude Stein of the *Autobiography* in *Tender Buttons*, in the form of relatively intelligible comment, often parenthetical in spirit. Thus at the end of the section on Mutton (which begins 'A letter which can wither, a learning which can suffer and an outrage which is simultaneous is principal') comes this sentence: 'A meal in mutton mutton why is lamb

cheaper, it is cheaper because so little is more,' which is easily recognized as a favorite prejudice of the Gertrude Stein of the *Autobiography*. Similarly such a phrase as 'the sad procession of the unkilled bull,' in *An Elucidation*, is plainly a reference to another of Miss Stein's interests. But, far from damaging our theory, this occasional appearance of Miss Stein herself is precisely what the theory demands. In her paper in the *Psychological Review* she deals at length with the inevitable alternation of conscious and automatic selves, and in the quotation we have given it will be remembered that she comments upon these 'flashes of consciousness.' Even though the greater part of *Tender Buttons* is automatic, we should expect an 'element of connected thought,' and our only problem is that which Miss Stein herself has considered — namely, are we to attribute to conscious flashes all the connected thought that is present?

There is a certain logical difficulty here. It may be argued that, since we dispense with all the intelligible sentences by calling them conscious flashes, we should not be surprised to find that what is left is thin and meaningless. We must therefore restate our theory, in a way that will avoid this criticism. We first divide the writings of Gertrude Stein into two parts on the basis of their ordinary intelligibility. I do not contend that this is a hard and fast line, but it is a sufficiently real one for most persons. It does not, it is to be understood, follow the outlines of her works. We then show that the unintelligible part has the characteristics of the automatic writing produced by Miss Stein in her early psychological experiments, and from this and many other considerations we conclude that our division of the work into two parts is real and valid and that one part is automatic in nature.

I cannot find anything in the *Autobiography* or the other works I have read that will stand against this interpretation. On the contrary, there are many bits of evidence, none of which would be very convincing in itself, that support it. Thus (1) *Tender Buttons* was written on scraps of paper, and no scrap was ever thrown away; (2) Miss Stein likes to write in the presence of distracting noises; (3) her handwriting is often more legible to Miss Toklas than to herself (that is, her writing is 'cold' as soon as it is produced); and (4) she is 'fond of writing the letter *m*,' with which, the reader will recall, the automatic procedure often began. In *An Elucidation*, her 'first effort to realize clearly just what her writing meant and why it was as it was,' there are many fitful allusions to the experimental days: 'Do you all understand extraneous memory,' 'In this way my researches are easily read,' a suddenly interpolated 'I stopped I stopped myself,' which recalls the major difficulty in her experiments, and so on.

V

It is necessary to assume that when Gertrude Stein returned to the practice of automatic writing (about 1912?) she had forgotten or was shortly to forget its origins. I accept as made in perfectly good faith the statement in the *Autobiography* that 'Gertrude Stein never had subconscious reactions, nor was she a successful subject for automatic writing,' even though the evidence to the contrary in her early paper is incontrovertible. She has forgotten it, just as she forgot her first novel almost immediately after it was completed and did not remember it again for twenty-five years. It is quite possible, moreover, that the manner in which she writes the *Tender Buttons* sort of thing is not unusual enough to

remind her of its origins or to be remarked by others. One of the most interesting statements in the excerpt quoted from her early paper is that Gertrude Stein found it sufficient distraction simply to follow what she was writing some few words behind her pencil. If in the course of time she was able to bring her attention nearer and nearer to the pencil, she must eventually have reached a point at which there remained only the finest distinction between 'knowing what one is going to write and knowing that one has written it.' This is a transitional state to which Miss Stein devotes considerable space in her paper. It is therefore reasonable for us to assume that the artificial character of the experimental procedure has completely worn off, and that there remains only a not-far-from-normal state into which Miss Stein may pass unsuspectingly enough and in which the *Tender Buttons* style is forthcoming.

Having begun to produce stuff of this sort again, however, Miss Stein could not have failed to notice its peculiarities. We have her own opinion that the sentences quoted from her automatic writing do not show much connected thought, and I believe we are fully justified in our characterization of the greater part of *Tender Buttons* as 'ordinarily unintelligible.' I know that it would be quite possible for an industrious and ingenious person to find any number of meanings in it, just as it is possible to find meanings in any chance arrangement of words. But the conclusion to which we are now led is that the work with which we are dealing is very probably unintelligible in any ordinary sense, not only to other readers, but to Miss Stein herself. Why, then, did she publish?

It is important for our theory that between 1896 and 1912 Miss Stein had

come to know Picasso and Matisse and was already long in the practice of defending their work against the question, 'What does it mean?' With such an experience behind one, it is not difficult to accept as art what one has hitherto dismissed as the interesting and rather surprising result of an experiment. It was, I believe, only because Gertrude Stein had already prepared the defense as it applied to Picasso that she could put forth her own unintelligible product as a serious artistic experiment. For a person of the sound intelligence of Miss Stein there is a great natural resistance against the production of nonsense. It was the major problem in her experimental technique: 'I stopped I stopped myself.' But the writing succeeded in this case, because the resistance had been broken down, first by the procedure of the experiments, which permitted the sustained production of meaningless sentences, and later by the championing of Picasso, which permitted their publication. This was a fortunate combination of circumstances. 'I could explain,' she says in *An Elucidation*, 'how it happened accidentally that fortunately no explanation was necessary.'

Miss Stein has not, however, freed herself from the problem of the meaning of the things she writes. She is not above being bothered by criticism on the score of unintelligibility. She often characterizes her work in this vein as experimental, but that is in no sense an explanation. Beyond this her answer seems to be that the writing is its own justification.

It was not a question, she told her Oxford audience, of whether she was right in doing the kind of writing she did. 'She had been doing as she did for about twenty years and now they wanted to hear her lecture.' And she had previously dealt with the matter in *An Elucidation*:—

If it is an event just by itself is there a question
 Tulips is there a question
 Pets is there a question
 Furs is there a question
 Folds is there a question
 Is there anything in question.

I think we must accept this answer to the ethical question of whether she is doing right by Oxford and the King's English. The final test of whether it is right is whether anyone likes it. But a literary composition is not 'an event just by itself,' and the answer to Miss Stein's query is that there certainly *are* questions, of a critical sort, that may legitimately be raised. Meaning is one of them.

One kind of meaning that might be found if our theory is valid is psychological. In noting the presence of verbal slips ('substitutions similar in sound but utterly different in sense') we lay ourselves open to the criticism of the Freudian, who would argue that there are no true slips. According to this view, there is always some reason why the substitution is made, and the substituted word will have a deeper significance if we can find it. But we are here not primarily concerned with such psychological significances.

Of literary significances it may be urged that for the initiated or sympathetic reader there is an intellectual content in this part of Miss Stein's work that we have overlooked. Now, either this will be of such a sort that it could also be expressed normally, or it will be a special kind of content that requires the form given to it by Miss Stein. A partisan could so easily prove the first case by translating a representative passage that we may assume it not to be true. The second case requires a very difficult theory of knowledge in its defense, and we shall not need to inquire into it any more closely. It is quite true that something happens

to the conscientious reader of *Tender Buttons*. Part of the effect is certainly due either to repetition or to surprise. These are recognized literary devices, and it may be argued that still a third kind of meaning, which we may designate as emotional, is therefore to be found. But in ordinary practice these devices are supplementary to expressions of another sort. The mere generation of the effects of repetition and surprise is not in itself a literary achievement.

VI

We have allowed for the presence of any or all of these kinds of meaning by speaking only of ordinary intelligibility. I do not think that a case can be made out for any one of them that is not obviously the invention of the analyzer. In any event the present argument is simply that the evidence here offered in support of a theory of automatic writing makes it *more probable* that meanings are not present, and that we need not bother to look for them. A theory of automatic writing does not, of course, necessarily exclude meanings. It is possible to set up a second personality that will possess all the attributes of a conscious self and whose writings will be equally meaningful. But in the present case it is clear that, as Miss Stein originally intended, a true second personality does not exist. This part of her work is, as she has characterized her experimental result, little more than 'what her arm wrote.' And it is an arm that has very little to say. This is, I believe, the main importance of the present theory for literary criticism. It enables one to assign an origin to the unintelligible part of Gertrude Stein that puts one at ease about its meanings.

There are certain aspects of prose writing, such as rhythm, that are not particularly dependent upon intelligi-

bility. It is possible to experiment with them with meaningless words, and it may be argued that this is what is happening in the present case. Considering the freedom that Miss Stein has given herself, I do not think the result is very striking, although this is clearly a debatable point. It is a fairer interpretation, however, to suppose, in accordance with our theory, that there is no experimentation at the time the writing is produced. There may be good reason for publishing the material afterward as an experiment. For example, I recognize the possibility of a salutary, though accidental, effect upon Gertrude Stein's conscious prose or upon English prose in general. In *Composition As Explanation*, for example, there is an intimate fusion of the two styles, and the conscious passages are imitative of the automatic style. This is also probably true of parts of the *Autobiography*. It is perhaps impossible to tell at present whether the effect upon her conscious prose is anything more than a loss of discipline. The compensating gain is often very great.

We have no reason, of course, to estimate the literary value of this part of Miss Stein's work. It might be considerable, even if our theory is correct. It is apparent that Miss Stein believes it to be important and has accordingly published it. If she is right, if this part of her work is to become historically as significant as she has contended, then the importance of the document with which we began is enormous. For the first time we should then have an account by the author herself of how a literary second personality has been set up.

I do not believe this importance exists, however, because I do not believe in the importance of the part of Miss Stein's writing that does not make sense. On the contrary, I regret the unfortunate effect it has had in obscuring the finer work of a very fine mind. I welcome the present theory because it gives one the freedom to dismiss one part of Gertrude Stein's writing as a probably ill-advised experiment and to enjoy the other and very great part without puzzlement.