

THE COLLAGE OF METAFICTIVE THEMES IN  
GERTRUDE STEIN'S A NOVEL OF THANK YOU

THESIS

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By

John Reep, B.A.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Let us consider the value of thank you the novel of thank you  
the novel of thank you and the value of the novel of thank you.*

In 1958, Carl Van Vechten, one of Gertrude Stein's closest friends and champions during her life, as well as her literary executor after her death, wrote the introduction to A Novel of Thank You, the final installment in the eight-volume Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein. He called the book a work "about which very little has been written," and forty years later, we might still make the same observation (ix). Written in 1925-26, though not published until 12 years after her death, A Novel of Thank You remains one of the more obscure works in Stein's oeuvre, with only two editions of the novel having ever gone into print. Substantive commentary has been rare, and only the most dedicated Stein scholars have taken much note of the book, usually offering only a few passing remarks. Like the bulk of Stein's work, it seems destined to remain ignored as those few critics who have dared to read and comment on Stein and her literary innovations prefer to concentrate their attention on more accessible works such as Three Lives or The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, or if they are brave enough to try Stein's more experimental writing, they focus on works such as Tender Buttons. Perhaps critics have taken their cue from Stein herself, who made

very little mention of A Novel of Thank You after the work was completed, referring to it only briefly in The Autobiography.

Carl Van Vechten's introduction to the original Yale edition, titled "A Few Notes A Propos of a 'Little' Novel of Thank You," mostly just muses on the strangeness of the work, offers some historical background concerning the novel's creation, and includes Alice Toklas's comments on the identities of some of the scores of names that one finds in the text. Van Vechten's observations and notes are satisfactory as an introduction but are really not helpful if one is looking for insightful and in-depth criticism.

Nevertheless, Van Vechten's introduction has been the starting point for the scant criticism which has followed. Perhaps Van Vechten's most lasting contribution has been to designate A Novel of Thank You an example of Stein at her most "hermetic." That daunting word echoes down through all of the commentary and it may be one of the factors that prevents other critics from exploring this and other examples of Stein's radically experimental work from the 1910s and 1920s.

The only book-length work of criticism that has been attempted on A Novel of Thank You is Maureen Liston's 1987 book An Essay to Introduce Gertrude Stein's *A Novel of Thank You*. Liston's book is important for the detailed examinations of the text as well as the "maps" she provides of the individual chapters and their contents. In the preface to her book, she explains her intent: "It is not my goal in studying A Novel of Thank You to answer questions but to raise

them. As a creator, an experimenter, Stein seems to me to be more interested in a variety of possibilities than in one set solution. A Novel of Thank You offers no solution, but a world of possibilities” (Liston 13). Of course, Liston is not shy about expressing her own opinions about what the book is, what it claims to do, and how it should be read. Since it is the only piece of extended criticism that exists on A Novel of Thank You, I will, obviously, refer to it repeatedly in this thesis and use it as a source of ideas with which I either agree or disagree.

Aside from Liston’s book, the remaining criticism and commentary has been brief and mostly superficial. It seems that only a few Stein scholars have bothered to read A Novel of Thank You, and those who have read it have had very little to say about it. A dozen years after Carl Van Vechten offered his “few notes,” Richard Bridgman, in his 1970 book Gertrude Stein in Pieces, devoted only three paragraphs to his examination of A Novel of Thank You, calling it “her ‘history of what we heard when we said it’” (Bridgman 172). He took Stein literally when she writes “The central theme of the novel is that they were glad to see each other” (NOTY 72) and argued that although the “details of the book are indeed formidable and difficult to comprehend, its main movement is not” (Bridgman 173). Bridgman claimed to observe a diary-like account of “a temporary imbalance in a relationship” buried beneath Stein’s seemingly opaque mass of words, and he quotes from several passages of the text in support of this idea (173).

The next critical commentary to appear is found in Michael Hoffman’s

book Gertrude Stein (1986). Hoffman's book is primarily an introduction to Stein and her work, so he does not spend much time on lesser-known works like A Novel of Thank You. The five paragraphs that he does devote to the book, however, borrow most of their ideas from Bridgman. Hoffman agrees with Bridgman that the book tells the story of some sort of failed relationship but adds, the "story is almost impossible for us to follow; and I shall not even attempt to summarize its 'plot'" (Hoffman 92). And like Bridgman, he also reads the book as a sort of diary: "It is as though Stein recorded every night the few new things that happened to her during the day or listed what she might have remembered from the past" (92).

In 1988, Bruce Kellner edited a volume called A Gertrude Stein Companion which consists of essays by other Stein scholars as well as his own commentary. Like Michael Hoffman, Kellner includes brief commentaries for all of Stein's major works. Unlike Hoffman, Kellner does not rely on Richard Bridgman as his primary source for information for A Novel of Thank You. He also breaks from the other two by taking no stock in Carl Van Vechten's introduction, calling it "rather unilluminating" (51). Kellner interprets the work as a commentary on the genre of the novel: "Talking to herself frequently, much in the manner she employed in The Making of Americans, she broods on the novel as a form which tells the truth and suggests that art itself is life" (50). Unfortunately, Kellner does not elaborate further on this idea.

The 1990s has seen a "resurgence"—if one can call it that—in interest in A

Novel of Thank You. In addition to Dalkey Archive's 1994 edition, two new critics have contributed intelligent commentaries on Stein's almost-forgotten work. First, Ellen Berry includes a chapter on A Novel of Thank You in her book Curved Thought and Textual Wandering. Berry tries to merge the usual feminist reading of Stein (which defines Stein as a writer who sought to upset the traditional, "patriarchal" narrative structures of continuity, coherence, succession, and hierarchy, and replace them with the apparently "female" qualities of fluidity, discontinuity, subjectivity, and flux) with a philosophy based heavily on deconstruction (Berry 86). Berry notes how Stein "deliberately dismisses the linear causal structure that forms the cornerstone of realist fiction" (65), "refuses the comfort of an explanation or even coherent moments of vision by raising permanently unsolved questions and thus deliberately foregrounding absence" (71), and de-emphasizes traditionally important components of the novel form such as plot, narrative, character, and setting (72). She believes the "hermetic" qualities of the book are a result of Stein's "decentering impulse" towards the text, "deliberately foregrounding absence," refusing "regular predictable patterns," and setting the text "in perpetual motion in every direction" (71). Berry places A Novel of Thank You in the postmodernist tradition which defies "the static linear plot of realist fiction" and the "fragmented but ultimately recombining (or centered) space of the modernist novel" (87).

The most recent commentary on A Novel of Thank You that I am aware of is Steven Meyer's introduction to the Dalkey Archive edition of the book. Like

Liston, Meyer poses different possible approaches to the novel, suggesting that one may read it as a novel *per se*, as a work about novels, as an historical novel, or as a novel of manners. However, Meyer's most interesting contribution to the study of this peculiar book may be his demonstration of how the author drew inspiration for portions of her text from the illustrations found on the covers of the notebooks in which she wrote. Meyer includes in an appendix facsimile reproductions of the covers of twelve of the eighty notebooks that Stein used while writing A Novel of Thank You. Upon observing the connections between the illustrations on the covers and the text, one can see another danger in attempting to analyze Stein's more innovative works and make assumptions about what they appear to be "about." For example, Maureen Liston quotes from "Chapter LI," a single-paragraph chapter on page 23 which reads, in part, "Three to four men and a woman. A house and houses and trees. . . . they looked up at it as if it was to be near than it was when it was actually in sight." Liston suggests that this is "the cast of characters, setting and synopsis of a story or a play" (Liston 110). But as we see from the illustration provided by Meyer, "Chapter LI" begins Notebook VII which has on its cover a drawing of a man flying in a glider, being observed by three men and a woman standing on the ground with houses and trees in the background. When we compare the drawing with the text, it is clear that Stein is simply describing the notebook cover, and offering an interpretation that tries to read more into it than that, as Liston does, is risky.

Liston's mistake demonstrates the dangers involved in approaching a work



as “hermetic” as A Novel of Thank You and perhaps offers an explanation for why Stein critics have been hesitant to engage this book: because it is difficult to ever know with certainty what Stein is referring to in her text. Since Stein’s experimental writing can at times be extremely obscure and confusing, it appears to be almost impossible for anyone to really know what Stein is trying to say. Yet many critics feel compelled to explicate *precisely* what each sentence and each phrase in Stein’s unusual texts means. For them, Stein’s prose and poetry is a vast code which needs to be deciphered before any further analysis of her work can proceed.

One example of this form of commentary, popular among some feminist critics and writers such as Elizabeth Fifer, Margaret Dickie and Pamela Hadas during the 1980s and 1990s, has been to identify what has become known as the “erotic code” beneath the seeming nonsense of Stein’s work from the 1910s and 1920s. This method of interpretation posits that Stein is a writer of what amounts to erotic literature—literature that could never have found acceptance in the heterosexual, patriarchal society in which Stein lived. This “erotic code” allowed Stein to euphemistically substitute words and phrases for descriptions of sexual acts and names of unmentionable body parts. While there is some evidence to suggest that Stein does use certain tropes, such as puns, in this manner, those critics who argue for the “erotic code” tend to dwell excessively on this issue of Stein’s sexual orientation, elevating this aspect of her life to a position of extreme prominence in her work. However, this view tends to diminish Stein’s importance

as a literary innovator, and it ignores Alice Toklas' insistence after Stein's death that Stein's sexuality was not the dominant factor in her creative processes.

Paradoxically, some critics cite Stein's public silence in matters sexual as evidence for a sexual preoccupation. Margaret Dickie writes: "It is strange that Gertrude Stein, who claimed so much for herself, did not want to assert openly the erotic source of her poetry, preferring to distance herself from it by retreating into abstractions of language experiments" (20).

Dickie points to works such as Q.E.D., "Ada," and "Lifting Belly" as evidence for a lesbian preoccupation in the content of Stein's experimental work. But writings such as these actually *contradict* the argument for an "erotic code" because these three pieces are so *obviously* about Stein's lesbian experience. The homosexual relationship between the three main characters of Q.E.D. is expressed clearly and not hidden within an obscure or unusual style of writing. "Ada" requires nothing more than a basic familiarity with Stein and Toklas' personal history for the reader to understand what the subject is. And as for "Lifting Belly," the most "hermetic" of the three, there are passages of such clarity that the application of a code is not necessary, for example, "Kiss my lips. She did./ Kiss my lips again she did./ Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did" (WI 425). These three works demonstrate that when Stein's theme is primarily sexual, she does not need to resort to any secret code in order to express herself.

Fortunately, not every Stein critic has jumped on the Freudian bandwagon. Maureen Liston prefers to take a more pragmatic approach to this theme of

eroticism which has polarized Stein criticism. She writes,

The extremes are obvious: many critics completely ignore, for whatever reason, the presence of the erotic in Stein's writing; some insist on reading all of Stein's works as coded lesbian literature. Here I am in complete agreement with Donald Sutherland, who found it 'depressing and diminishing' to 'interpret a great deal of Gertrude Stein's work as more or less camouflaged accounts of lesbianism.' Certainly lesbianism is not the only theme in Stein's writings, but theme it is" (Liston 86).

Liston goes on to add that a strict erotic interpretation of all of Stein's experimental work "represent to me misreadings of Stein. . . . While not denying the presence of intimacies in Stein's work, I maintain that there are other aspects in these works which are as important or are more important" (87).

Besides rejecting the notion of an "erotic code" prevailing in Gertrude Stein's work, Liston also offers her own theory about the correct way to read A Novel of Thank You or any of Stein's other experimental pieces. She thinks of the chapters as fragmentary and suggests the possibility that they may be lifted out of the text so that they "might become more meaningful than when read as part of the whole" (145). Liston also believes that reading Stein must be a mostly passive experience, that "Any attempt at reaction, at an active engagement in the work, at a creative dialogue with the author upsets the spell the author tries to weave" (135). This "spell" is a result of what Liston calls the monotony of the book, the repetition and seeming meaninglessness that "bores the reader, hypnotizes,

distracts, only to suddenly offer a lovely rhyming passage, a joke, a comment on the landscape, or an introduction to an acquaintance” and that it is these sudden changes which are of importance (136). Liston then quotes long passages of “Normal Motor Autonomism,” the controversial article that Stein wrote in conjunction with Leon Solomons when Stein was still a student at Radcliffe and which Stein later disavowed as having any significance either for psychology or for an understanding of her writing (EA 267). Liston tries to show a link between the ideas expressed in the article and Stein’s repetition. As an example of her theory, she quotes one of the most repetitive passages in A Novel of Thank You in its entirety, an untitled, two-sentence chapter late in the book:

#### CHAPTER

After they came did they they came after they came did they after they came did they after did they after they came did they after they came did they after they came after they came did they after they came she was very interested in saying did they after they came he and she were very interested after they came did they after they came they were very interested after they came did they being interested after they came they did after they were very interested after they came after they did did they after they came they were very interested after they came did they they did after they came they were very interested after they came they had theirs as they had liked the best and they had been if they had these as they were leaving it to them after they did leave it to them did they and not to like it very

much very much and thanking thanking very much and they very much as they were as they did very much and they very much as they were as they did very much and very well I thank you. It is very useful to have a blue flower and a green stem (218).

Following the excessive repetition in the first sentence of this chapter, Liston calls the second sentence a “magical and emotional surprise” (144) although she admits she does not know “how a flower and a stem can be useful or why the flower and the stem are not together or what the meaning of this is” (144-5). Such unexpected contrasts in subject matter are to be found throughout the novel, but I believe Liston has overemphasized their importance.

I disagree with Liston on these two points: 1) that the reader must remain in a passive state while reading and 2) that reading only parts of the novel can lead to more insights than by reading the whole. It seems to me that Stein expects her readers to be, if not active, then at least conscious and attentive to the text even when it becomes monotonous and repetitive. A Novel of Thank You is a novel that explores several themes that are important to Stein, such as the act of writing, logic, identity, and even her love for Toklas. Stein litters her text with motifs which illustrate these themes, repeats them, and explores them. While it is not necessary to read the book in strict chronological order to detect the themes, one must read all of it to catch all of their many aspects. Reading only a few of the chapters gives rise to the possibility that one might miss some of the important motifs which Stein employs, and one thus risks overlooking Stein’s broader

themes. The chapter quoted above, which Liston believes lulls the reader into a trance in order to spring the “revelation” of the image of a blue flower with a green stem, is instead a test that Stein forces the reader to endure. What is especially important and noteworthy in the passage is not the last sentence, but the end of the first sentence, “. . . very much and thanking thanking very much and they very much as they were as they did very much and very well I thank you.” This notion of excessive thanking is one of the motifs of the novel, the dominant motif, in fact, of the final phase of the book, and one which I will explicate in greater detail later. Stein expects us to catch these motifs when they are presented, and only by reading the entire book, and exposing ourselves to the entire text, are we able to identify them and understand them fully.

But no matter what approach to Stein we want to take, one thing is clear: A Novel of Thank You, like so much of Stein’s work, cannot be approached through the traditional techniques that we use when we approach the novel genre. We bring to the novels we read certain expectations: that they should tell a stories; they should be set in worlds which, if not like ours, are ones which we can comprehend; and they should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. But Stein’s novels do not always do this. Her major novels resemble less other fictional stories than extended analyses of personality and psychology. As one reads her work, one feels as if Stein is critiquing the elements of her novels at the same time as she is writing them. A Novel of Thank You also engages in this sort of analysis, but it takes it to an extreme.

Even one who casually skims through this novel cannot help but notice its peculiar qualities. It contains a great many chapters—more chapters than pages, in fact—and most chapters are less than a page long. Some chapters consist of only a paragraph, or a sentence. Some consist of only a single word, such as “Chapter CXCVII” which reads simply, “Religion.” Her diction is composed of everyday words, causing the text to appear inviting and easy to read, but one quickly finds that this simplicity is an illusion. Take this sentence from “Chapter CLIV,” for example: “In this as they having sent it before they came to beg them to believe them and they might differently disturb themselves as much it might even be as very likely as ever that they had had all of it to be left here and there” (138). Stein often twists and distorts the syntax of her sentences until they approach a point of obscurity.

Proper names and personal pronouns appear on every page, suggesting an abundance of characters, but there are almost no conversations—or at least Stein does not distinguish between the dialogue of her characters and the rest of the text. In fact, Stein only uses quotation marks once in the entire novel on page 15. Really, the only punctuation marks to be found at all are commas and periods which do not always conform to the rules of proper usage. Sometimes they are used sparingly:

She wishes me to describe statuary statuary of a woman sitting by a seat and leaning on a pedestal and handling a vase and she wishes me to describe the elegance of her form the grace of her position and the flow of

her dress and she wishes me also to describe the color of the material and the lightness of the rock which imitated in marble which is clay resembles milk which is used and so we have before us what we have left behind us (NOTY 25).

And sometimes punctuation is used to excess:

As plainly as that.

And for this purpose.

And just as much.

And nearly there.

Nearly there makes an enemy know.

Know too.

For them. (126)

We notice in studying the style of the book that it bears only slight resemblance to her earlier novels Three Lives and The Making of Americans which also employed a rather experimental form of prose, though of a different sort. Stein's word choice for these two earlier novels is exemplified by the use of long sentences and endless paragraphs filled with verbs, gerunds, and adverbs. One of the few examples of this earlier style in A Novel of Thank You is found in "Chapter CLXIII" a portion of which reads,

Having been explaining as to leaving and having been leaving having been leaving having been explaining having been leaving. He knew that that was not what they were for. Having been explaining about leaving and



having been explaining having been explaining about leaving and knowing  
that that was not what that was for. (NOTY 143)

Most of the book, however, bears a closer resemblance to the style that Stein developed in the 1910s. This is the style which Stein called “poetry” and which is best known through works like Tender Buttons and her literary portraits. This style employs shorter sentences and choppy paragraphs. It uses highly connotative nouns and avoids the repetition found in her earlier style by using a wider variety of words combined in new and unexpected ways, such as we see in this excerpt from “Chapter LXV”:

Makes a mountain makes it than than if it was to buy another business.

Makes a mountain makes it than if there was a question of ownership.

Should a woman be taller. Should animals be fed and should a woman be fearful as much afraid as that and should a man if everybody asks about him should he be reliable. (33)

Shortly after she finished the manuscript for A Novel of Thank You, Stein began writing her second and only other full-length novel of the 1920s, Lucy Church Amiably. In the manuscripts for Lucy Church Amiably, we find that it was originally subtitled “A Novel No. 2” (Dydo 94). Stylistically, at least, the two novels have more in common with each other than with any of Stein’s other novels. Some passages might just as easily appear in A Novel of Thank You:

Be told.

One one one two three, three one three one two three. It is a

deception.

Every day in which very many come very many come. Every day in which very many come there is beside that they say where shall we go to stay where shall we go to stay. It is believed to be ineradicable that they are very often here every once in a while. They said what makes it be simple that they need it as a provision.

He resembles him in this light. (LCA 88)

But Lucy Church Amiably has more of the conventions of the traditional Realist novel, such as a specific setting and fictional characters. Although it does not have an easily discernible plot, there is a “greater sense of novelistic continuity . . . it is concerned, at least nominally, with the same set of characters all the way through” (Hoffman 95).

Just by a superficial examination of the text, then, we can see that A Novel of Thank You is a most unusual novel, but then, Stein was always a most unusual writer, preferring to disregard the conventions of the various literary forms she worked in and favoring the exploration of her own ideas. Q.E.D., Stein’s first serious attempt at novel-writing, is remarkably Realist in its prose style, yet its subject matter, a lesbian love triangle, was quite inappropriate for its time, so much so that Stein did not even bother to try to publish it. Having established herself in Paris with her brother Leo in the early 1900s, Stein, a student of psychology who had studied under William James at Radcliffe and was extremely influenced by his ideas, was introduced to the revolutionary experiments of post-

Impressionist painters such as Cézanne and Matisse. The influences of the post-Impressionists and William James inspired Stein's early experiments with words. The result was Three Lives, her first published work, and The Making of Americans, the novel that she considered her masterpiece. These early works, as well as the novel fragment Fernhurst, make up the first phase of Stein's career as a novelist.

A fourteen-year gap followed the completion of the manuscript for The Making of Americans (in 1911) and the beginning of her next novel, A Novel of Thank You. During the 1910s and early 1920s Stein experimented with other literary genres, especially poetry, drama, and literary portraiture. All the while, Stein attempted to find a publisher for The Making of Americans, but met with no success. Finally, in 1924, with the help of Hemingway and the support of Ford Madox Ford, the opening chapters of The Making of Americans were serialized in the Transatlantic Review (Mellow 322), and in the following year, the huge novel at last found a publisher in Contact Editions (378). Steven Meyer suggests a connection between the publication of The Making of Americans and the creation of A Novel of Thank You: "A Novel of Thank You is in this respect a return to her literary origins, a return provoked by the imminent publication of the 'Long Book'" (Meyer x). I agree, but I think that perhaps Meyer underestimates the connection. After spending fourteen years away from novel-writing, Stein needed an opportunity to regroup and meditate on what a novel by Gertrude Stein should

be and what it should accomplish. Stein could not simply pick up where she left off from The Making of Americans because her writing style had changed so dramatically in the interim since 1911 as had some of her ideas concerning philosophy, psychology, and literature. The excitement that Stein must have felt, knowing that her “masterpiece” was at last going to be published, and the many hours Stein and Alice Toklas spent during the summer of 1925 correcting the proofs for the “Long Book” must have rekindled her interest in prose and inspired many of the meditations on narrative and novels that one finds in Stein’s work during the mid-1920s, not only in A Novel of Thank You, but also in “Natural Phenomena” and “Composition as Explanation.” A Novel of Thank You also marked Stein’s return to composing works of some length. As Richard Bridgman notes, “A Novel of Thank You was the first work of substantial length that Gertrude Stein had written since the days of The Making of Americans, A Long Gay Book, and Many, Many Women” (173).

A Novel of Thank You may also be placed within a program of commentary upon literature, especially of her own, which was an important concern of Stein’s during the 1920s and 1930s. This program began with “An Elucidation” in 1923 and includes (but is not limited to) such works as “Composition As Explanation,” the essays of How To Write, the six lectures she gave during her American tour in 1934-5, Narration, The Geographical History of America, “What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them,” and those many portions of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and Everybody’s

Autobiography in which Stein discusses her writing. Stein herself places A Novel of Thank You in this tradition, writing, in The Autobiography, that this novel led “to the whole series of meditations on grammar and sentences” (SW 211).

A Novel of Thank You was most likely begun early in the summer of 1925 while Stein and Toklas were beginning their annual summer retreat in Bilignin (Liston 50). Originally, the book was simply titled, A Novel, and it is difficult to say exactly when A Novel was renamed A Novel of Thank You. I am not even certain who is responsible for this change. In her notebooks and in her letters to Carl Van Vechten, Stein always referred to the book as A Novel. She retained that title at least as late as 1932 when she mentions the work in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas: “It was during this summer that Gertrude Stein began two long things, A Novel and the Phenomena of Nature . . .” (SW 211). At some point, then, between 1932 and 1958, the date of publication for the first edition of A Novel of Thank You, the book was renamed. It is possible that the new title was not Stein’s decision at all. Van Vechten, acting as Stein’s literary executor, might have made the change, or, more likely, Alice Toklas, who is well-known for her “corrections” of Stein’s manuscripts, might have suggested the new name (Bridgman 211-212).

Whatever the case, I think that A Novel is a far more fitting title for the work than A Novel of Thank You, which I find to be too restricting. While the “thank you” motif is one of the most easily recognizable motifs in the work, it is not constant throughout (the words “thank,” “thanking,” and “thank you” only

appear with frequency during the last third of the novel). If we wanted to choose a title that highlighted a more persistent motif, we might choose “A Novel of Arranging” or “A Novel of Numbers.” But even these titles would not accurately reflect the subject matter of the book, for A Novel is not simply about thank you, arranging, or numbers, but it is about all of these things—and more—simultaneously.

At about the same time that Gertrude Stein began writing A Novel, she also began work on a piece called “Natural Phenomena.” Stein would later link these two works together whenever she spoke of them, not only because they were written simultaneously, but, I believe, because they are also thematically connected. In her letters to Carl Van Vechten, Stein allows us a glimpse at the evolution of the two works during the course of their creation. In a letter dated June 9, 1925, we read “Nothing else xciting xcept my little Novel and my long Natural Phenomena at which I am working.” The words “little” and “long” suggest that Stein considered “Natural Phenomena” to be the work of more substance, and, possibly, of more importance. In fact, the “little Novel” would eventually grow to four times the length of the “long Natural Phenomena.” Only two months later, on August 22, Stein puts both pieces on equal footing: “. . . I’ve done a lot of work I like my novel and my P[henomena] o[f] N[ature]. . . .” Stein does not say in these letters when she finally completes “Natural Phenomena,” but A Novel requires another year before it is completed in November 1926.

Also of interest in these letters is a hint that she would like to see both

pieces published. In July 1925, Stein writes, “I have an idea that when I finish my little novel, well it isn’t a little novel but then you know how it is, it is a novel, well when I finish that and the Phenomena of nature together they would make a volume of 100 pages or a little more 150 perhaps it would be rather nice A Novel and Natural Phenomena.” Such a statement contradicts the notion furthered by Maureen Liston, and implied by critics who have called this book “hermetic,” that A Novel of Thank You was conceived as a private document for the eyes of Stein and Toklas only. Indeed, such a notion is especially strange given Stein’s lifelong obsession to see all of her work in print, no matter how experimental or opaque it may seem to the public at large.

The association of A Novel and “Natural Phenomena” is based on more than just their chronological proximity. Stein refers to A Novel in the text of “Natural Phenomena” and establishes a point of contrast between the two: “There is a difference between Phenomena of Nature and A Novel” (PL 209). The difference is found in the different subject matter that the two works explore. “Natural Phenomena” is concerned with the nature of objects as they exist independently of human beings. Early in the work, Stein limits her focus to elements of the physical world such as rainbows, volcanoes, oceans and the like. These are things that have been in the world for a great deal longer than humanity, as Stein herself realizes:

Supposing no one was interested is interested or interested and dare.

How often in the center is the eye, why cry. How often is there

between wells why why well. How often is there miles around a wharf  
why feel it as a river when it is not.

Not influenced by me. Not being so. (PL 167)

Thereafter, Stein characteristically reconsiders the subject matter of her meditation: “Having changed one’s mind about natural and naturally” (176) and expands her definition of nature to include human artifacts and abstract concepts: “Thunder winter and lightning, lakes, borders and feathers, shawls hangings and trceries birds hours and at once” (220). One of the ideas to be gleaned from this work is that what Stein calls natural phenomena can have an effect on human beings, but human beings cannot have any great impact on natural phenomena. This is not so with a novel, however, and especially not with A Novel of Thank You, as I will demonstrate later. Stein’s novels do not exist independently of human experience, but are instead very much products of it.

In the remainder of this thesis, I will show how we might view A Novel of Thank You as a metafiction, an exposition of what we might call the “Steinian novel” as Stein conceived it during the mid-1920s. A Novel of Thank You, although it lacks such conventional elements as a definite narrative, a plot, fictional characters, and a particular setting, reveals instead a number of themes and methods of composition which are found in her other novels and works. Stein presents these themes via a set of motifs that stand out from the rest of the text. These motifs signify larger metafictional themes, and identifying and analyzing them, I believe, is a fruitful approach to understanding A Novel of Thank You.



## CHAPTER TWO: METAFICTION

*Consider a novel a novel of it.*

Whether we want to call it A Novel of Thank You or simply A Novel, that word “novel” stands out from the title of the book. So often, the reader of Stein wishes that she would include genre designations in many of her titles. What exactly, for example, is “Natural Phenomena” or Tender Buttons? In this case, the word “novel” tells us, before we even open the book, that Stein wants us to approach this particular work as we would approach a novel. It serves to define our expectations. We have read enough novels to observe similarities among the many different novels and different authors. We expect that a novel will tell a story, that it will have characters, be they human or not. A novel is most likely a lengthy work which is made easier to read over the course of several sittings by divisions such as chapters or parts. The events described in a novel usually proceed chronologically over a limited amount of time. And while a novel is a work of fiction, it also “purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals”; sometimes novels are inspired by real people or real events (Watt 27).

Throughout A Novel of Thank You, Stein explicitly meditates on the

Throughout A Novel of Thank You, Stein explicitly meditates on the subject of the novel and explores its functions and possibilities. She considers specific sub-genres, such as historical novels: “. . . a historical novel is not a history of everyone” (146); and “A historical novel is one that has to do with her having been remaining” (147). Stein considers a novel’s formal qualities: “What is the difference between a novel and a story, no one said it” (18); and “Increasing a novel. How to increase a novel and stay further apart . . .” (56). She considers the importance of the novel: “A novel makes a man.” (30); “He needed a novel” (104); and “To imagine that a novel is once in a while necessary” (152). Of course, not all of her statements are clear or make perfect sense—some are intriguingly enigmatic: “A novel makes more than a third, it makes less than is heard it makes more than is inferred” (35); and “A novel and the future the novel and the rest and the rest is diamonds” (151). Towards the end she plays with the phrase that eventually would become the book’s title: “Let us consider the value of thank you the novel of thank you the novel of thank you and the value of the novel of thank you” (197); “A novel of thank you is historic” (198); and “A novel of thank you makes it be theirs too” (217). And she meditates on the infinite possibilities of what a novel can be and do:

It is so easy to change a novel a novel can be a novel and it can be a story of the departure of Dr. Johnston it can be the story of the discovery of how after they went away nobody was as much rested as they had hoped to be.

It can also be an account of the discovery and the return of various parts of the country which have been gradually losing their identity and then after all when there is more than there has been of daylight they can after all be anxious. A novel may also be partly that they have not at all wondered why they had not had all of it and partly it may be that they have stood and are standing as much in this way as they did when they were underlined. By and by a novel may be dated by their having been very often eager about swimming it may also be arranged in such a fashion that they had better hear themselves return to it and very often and very often and how often and how often can they be radically after all by themselves and to their delight and to be happily when they were rejoined. Who can think about a novel. I can (112-113).

This sort of reflexive commentary does not end with the title or with explicit discussions about what a novel is and the many forms it can take. As we see throughout the book, Stein repeatedly calls the reader's attention to the fact that A Novel of Thank You is just a material thing and is not meant to be read, as perhaps one might read Three Lives or Mrs. Reynolds, as an "attempt to portray all the varieties of human experience," to portray people and places and events that one might easily encounter in the everyday world (Watt 11). Instead, she repeatedly offers analyses of her previous and present work. And she offers the

reader insights into her own creative process. Therefore, A Novel of Thank You may be best described as a metafiction.

Although the term *metafiction* was coined by William Gass in 1970, and is often used to describe much postmodern literature, novelists have long used techniques which today would be termed metafiction. Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon show how Cervantes, Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and especially Sterne all employed a variety of self-referential devices in their novels. Waugh even goes so far as to say that metafictional elements exist in *all* novels (5). In this century, metafiction has been part of a reaction against the realist literature of the nineteenth century. Realism in literature sought to establish a correspondence between life and literature, offering “a slice of life—not the whole of life, perhaps, but a selection that reveals a one-to-one relationship with the experience to which it refers” (Boyd 18). Anti-realist literature, one form of which is metafiction, rejects this notion of mimesis in art (19).

Linda Hutcheon, in contrasting the nineteenth-century realist novel with the twentieth-century metafictional postmodernist novel distinguishes between two very different mimetic goals, namely, the mimesis of product and the mimesis of process. Realist novels aim for a mimesis of product, that is, the reader is expected to equate the characters, actions, and settings in a realist novel with similar people, activities, and places which one finds in empirical reality (38). The reader is expected to believe the illusory world that the realist novel portrays.

The metafictional novel, however, does not seek “just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work” (39). The metafiction imitates “not any empirical world, but a view of its own linguistic and literary production” (46). The reader is forced to play a far more active role than realist novels expect. Hutcheon asserts that in metafiction the reader is assigned the role of constructing the fictional universe of the story (41). Although A Novel of Thank You does not have a single, explicit story nor does it create a “fictional universe” (unless we want to call it a universe of words), Stein does delegate much of the responsibility of constructing meaning out of her difficult and seemingly “hermetic” texts to her readers.

Through the mimesis of process, metafiction “lays bare the conventions of realism” rather than ignoring or abandoning them (Waugh 18). In the case of A Novel of Thank You, what Stein is “laying bare” is not so much the realist novel as her own novels (the Steinian novel), at least as she conceived of them in the mid-1920s. In A Novel of Thank You, Stein is giving her readers a peek at the ideas and methods at work when she writes by “extrapolating the ‘essence’” of her own unique fiction (78). Stein even goes so far as to record her thoughts during the writing process, as I would argue we see in this passage from the second “Chapter LXXI”:

Now come back to heavily come back to heavily.

Cannot mean in that room and why in that room. Cannot mean in the room.

She knew the name of her father and her mother and she said that she preferred her father to her mother.

Would he not the father and not the mother would he tell her that he would rather return he would rather hear further he would if he might return again.

That makes it as much as if they had in their being two and not at once neither of them came.

Could she be listening not if she did not hear it and heard it and they have twice two. Leave this to conversation.

Leaving out altogether that they were to they were to be they were to be there. Just like what just like it at all (NOTY 92).

The metafictional quality of A Novel of Thank You has not gone entirely unrecognized. Maureen Liston was the first to notice how Stein's concern for narrative form manifests itself in the novel. Although Liston never explicitly uses the term "metafiction" to describe the book, she does say it is "primarily a novel about novels, is pervaded with narrative and, despite the fact that most of her ruminations are not connected with one another on the surface, shows a prevailing concern with the novel" (123). But Liston restricts her investigation of this idea to those passages (some of which I quoted above) which explicitly mention the

words “novel” or “narrative.” Ellen Berry also recognizes A Novel of Thank You as a metafiction, and that the work is Stein’s conscious consideration of how the “substance and the form of the novel might be altered” to reflect the “changing conceptions of the production and reception of art” in the early twentieth century (64). My view of this book differs in that I think the book is a commentary not on the entire novel genre, but on the Steinian novel.

If A Novel of Thank You is metafiction, it is metafiction taken to an extreme. Even in postmodern literature, novels with prominent metafictional elements still retain other elements that we expect from a novel, such as a story. The reader is invited to join the author in considering the novel as a self-contained work of art, but the reader may also ignore such an invitation. Stein does not give the reader of A Novel of Thank You that choice. Here, Stein employs a host of restraints preventing the reader from focusing on the plot (if there even is one) and forces the reader to question whether this book really is what the title tells us it is: a novel.

We might place this “laying bare” of the “essence” of the Steinian novel in A Novel of Thank You within the larger program of identity versus entity which Stein developed during the middle years of her career and which reaches its fullest realization in her 1936 philosophical-psychological treatise The Geographical History of America. Stein began this program as an attempt to reduce her reliance

on sensory experience and memory in her early literary portraits. In her lecture, “Portraits and Repetition” she explains:

The trouble with including looking, as I have already told you, was that in regard to human beings looking invariably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present with past and future time (WII 301).

For Stein, it was removing that sense of time which was crucial in establishing immediacy in her portraits, and the “immediate evocation of essence” replaced more conventional descriptive methods (Steiner 47). In terms of A Novel of Thank You, this meant that Stein was able to use the form of the novel itself to demonstrate the fundamental essence of the Steinian novel.

In The Geographical History of America, Stein associates these two notions with two opposing processes of thought. Identity is associated with human nature which “is that part of man’s consciousness that makes relationships among objects, that has memory, that self-consciously refers back to its own identity, that has emotions, that is burdened with knowledge outside its immediate perceptions” (Hoffman 202). Stein does not like human nature, believing it to be anti-literary. Much of her career, in fact, might be viewed in terms of her struggle against human nature as it expresses itself in literature. In her early writings from 1912 and before, Stein developed the technique of rendering the “continuous present,”



an approach to reality based on William James' ideas of the continuity of experience and the stream of thought (WII 289). Just as reality changes, if ever so slightly, each second, so does each of her sentences change. For example, here is the first paragraph from her 1909 literary portrait of Picasso: "One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming" (WI 282). To explain this unique style of writing, Stein used an analogy: "I was doing what cinema was doing, I was making a continuous statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing" (294). The problem with this technique, however, is that even if each sentence captures one instant in time, the reader still must place the sentence in the larger context of all of the sentences in the portrait. Each sentence's uniqueness is only apparent when we compare it to the other similar sentences in the work, and this requires the use of one's memory and one's ability to "make relationships among objects." In other words, this kind of writing ultimately relies on human nature for comprehension.

The human mind, on the other hand, "has no emotions, memory, identity, or past. It is simply that part of the human consciousness that does nothing but perceive whatever data is immediately available to the senses" (Hoffman 202). A writer writing for the human mind, then, would transfer "the knowledge of the

human mind to paper as quickly as it is perceived” (202). Much of Stein’s post-1912 writing, including Tender Buttons, her plays of the late 1910s and 1920s, and, to a large extent, A Novel of Thank You, are all examples of writing designed for the human mind. In this new style, lengthy repetition of sentences and phrases is abandoned and Stein shifts the objects and ideas under discussion quickly and often, for example: “What happens is this. Very much very much and as much and as much and then markets, markets are open in the morning and except on Monday. This has been held to be then. Then they come to go they do and finally shall pronouncing make it as much as when they respected. They respected tact and generosity” (NOTY 109). Stein does not let her reader linger for very long on any one image or subject. She changes her train of thought even in the middle of a sentence. This sort of decontextualization occurs in metafiction where the “logic of the everyday world is replaced by forms of contradiction and discontinuity” (Waugh 136). Realist novels that purposely include textual contradictions usually finally resolve such contradictions, but in metafiction, uncertainty is never finally resolved (137).

This disorientation forces the reader to concentrate not on any narrative or story, but on the very words of the text. Michael Boyd writes, “By freeing the writer from the restrictions of everyday language, the novel that pretends to render the stream of consciousness inevitably forces upon us a sense of the strangeness of words, and this awareness will lead quite naturally to a focusing on the words

themselves rather than on the mental reality they purport to represent” (20). If a reader comes to A Novel of Thank You with the idea that he or she is going to be presented with an illusion of reality, then the reality presented here is “protean, a mental construct bereft of the certitude given by the belief in any universal laws” (Boyd 18). Unlike James Joyce, who invents thousands of new words ripe with multiple connotations in Finnegans Wake, Stein restricts her vocabulary to very simple, very ordinary words, but through a process of disorientation, Stein makes the ordinary seem strange, thereby reawakening “our sense of the uniqueness of individual acts of perception” (26). Stein requires an intelligent reader, able to perceive with the human mind, who can absorb the words as they come and not try to make sense of the contradictions, discontinuities, and confusion, and one who is able to suspend memory, emotion, empathy, and identity.

In The Geographical History of America, Stein argues that the great works of literature (which, of course, includes her own writings) are products of the human mind, not human nature. While any literature may be concerned with the subject of human nature, truly great literature has a special appeal to the human mind, or as Stein wrote, “What is seen may be the subject but it cannot be the object of a master-piece” (WII 467). Stein argued that a novel’s concern should be with knowledge rather than emotion or sentiment. A novel should be more like an almanac than a newspaper, and narrative should eliminate succession and replace it with immediacy (Steiner 182-3). Narrative succession is absent in A

Novel of Thank You. Even during the sequences of chapters which proceed numerically (such as “Chapter X,” “Chapter XI,” “Chapter XII,” etc.) there is never any sense, as one reads the book, that the organization of the text is intrinsically necessary. I still believe that to fully appreciate this book, one must read all of it, but it is just as possible to read the chapters by skipping around as it is to read them as a series. But however one reads the book, Stein stresses each chapter as a unique moment in time, disconnected from what comes before or after. The same may also be said for many of the paragraphs and sentences in the book. Often the sentences in a paragraph or the words in a sentence are not connected in any way, other than grammatically, to the other sentences or words. This shift from identity to entity means that the knowledge of a subject, in this case the Steinian novel, is obtained not through conventional description and narration, but through the immediate evocation of the essence of the components of the subject.

Michael Boyd offers a list of various metafictional techniques which reads, for the most part, like a description of A Novel of Thank You: “the reflexive novelist will invent new techniques to shatter the illusions of realism. The intrusive narrator will take on new roles. Footnotes and rough drafts will be incorporated into the fiction. The reflexive novelist will use non-novelistic material, space-time dislocations, collage, alternative endings, and parody to remind the reader that a novel is something made. Language will be used in such

a way that it calls attention to itself" (29). As we read A Novel of Thank You, we find Stein employing most, if not all, of these techniques.

Waugh explains one way in which a text can focus the reader's attention not on the story but on the text itself: "Through the emphasis on the arbitrary associations of sound, rhyme and image, attention is drawn to the formal organization of words in literature and away from their referential potential" (54). Stein sometimes uses rhyme or underscores the sounds of her words in her fiction, sometimes as a means of dictating the direction of the story or establishing its mood. In Mrs. Reynolds, Stein uses words that rhyme with the age of her character Angel Harper. Some examples: "When Angel Harper was forty-nine, the very first day that he was forty-nine and the sun did not shine . . ." (MR 151); "... Saint Odile knew that when Angel Harper was fifty-two he was through" (231); and "Angel Harper was not fifty-five alive" (330). In A Novel of Thank You, Stein uses sound and rhyme primarily for its playful effect. Sometimes the text breaks into song as she tunes her words to the rhythm of folk songs and nursery rhymes: "This is the way that they can pay that he can pay that she can pay this is the way that they can pay that they can pave the way" (NOTY 22). Stein even offers us a glimpse into how she sets phrases to musical rhythm. Consider these excerpts from "Chapter CXXV":

They were perfectly able to take care of themselves. And their ears.

Once again and they had not been very well ferried across. Imagine all of it in time.

One two three one two three one two three one two three.

In a carriage and out of a carriage and they never mentioned a carriage again.

One two three one two three one two three one two three. One two three one two three.

If she likes it cold if she likes it cold if she likes it cold if she likes it as cold. If they have half of it. If she likes it as cold. If she likes it cold. They have half of it (119-120).

Stein disorients the reader of A Novel of Thank You by denying a fixed point of view in the text. Most of the book seems to be written in some form of third-person narrative, considering the number of third-person pronouns used as the subjects and objects of her sentences. However, these pronouns lack clear and specific referents; the countless “hes,” “shes” and “theys” could refer to almost anyone, or no one—they may be mere words on the page. Sometimes there is a suggestion that Stein may be using these third-person pronouns to refer to herself. In “Chapter CXXXII,” which begins the series of chapters related to the creation and delivery of her lecture “Composition as Explanation” (another distinctly metafictional title), we find this passage:

Invited to address them.

They made them ask them ask them ask him ask him would he be able to address them.

He made them ask them would they be willing to have him address them.

He made them ask them would they ask him would he be willing to address them.

He made them they asked him would he be willing if they asked him would he be willing to address them (124).

“Invited to address them” obviously refers to the invitations to lecture that Stein received from Oxford and Cambridge which she eventually accepted. This passage alludes to the pressure that was put on her to lecture, pressure that she later describes in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

In the autumn of that year nineteen twenty-five Gertrude Stein had a letter from the president of the literary society of Cambridge asking her to speak before them in the early spring. Gertrude Stein quite completely upset at the very idea quite promptly answered no. Immediately came a letter from Edith Sitwell saying that the no must be changed to yes. That it was of the first importance that Gertrude Stein should deliver this address and that moreover Oxford was waiting for the yes to be given to Cambridge to ask her to do the same at Oxford (SW 219).

In the passage from A Novel of Thank You, Stein refers to herself with masculine third-person pronouns, causing us to wonder not only whether these pronouns have referents, but whether we can trust the pronouns in her book to signify the correct gender of the referent. Elsewhere in the book, Stein shifts to a first-person narrator (“Who can think about a novel. I can” [113]), and occasionally she uses a second-person pronouns as if speaking directly to the reader (“You know as well as I do that it does not make it different” [125]).

“Any one can use a chapter,” Stein writes, “and never recall it at all” (179). As one reads A Novel of Thank You, one might conclude that Stein uses chapters in an irreverent manner. Early in the book, Stein chooses some unusual titles for her chapters, such as “Chapter For Chapter,” “Chapters Beginning Here,” and “Chapters In The Middle,” which call attention to themselves as being chapters. Stein’s chapters may also serve the metafictional program of A Novel of Thank You by demonstrating Stein’s process of writing. One of the more peculiar things about her chapters is the repetition of some chapter titles. Early in the novel we find a series of 44 numbered chapters beginning with “Chapter XXXVIII” and ending with “Chapter LXXV.” A few of these chapters, such as “LVIII” and “LIX” are repeated once during this series, but on page 45, this entire series is reset. Following “Chapter LXXV” is “Chapter XXXVI” and this begins a new series of 41 chapters, most of which reuse the titles from the previous 44 chapters, ending with another “Chapter LXXII” (which is followed by “Chapter CII”). In



the opening lines of “Chapter XXXVI,” which begins the second series, we find evidence that Stein was trying to make a point in repeating these chapter titles and that this repetition did not simply occur at random or by some fleeting whim:

It is easy to change novels to two.

One and two.

Through and through.

You and you.

One and two.

Too many bow to two.

Too many (45).

Here we find Stein making a general statement about novels, “It is easy to change novels to two,” and then following that statement with a demonstration by including a portion of a second, or alternative text for her novel within the principal text by repeating the chapter titles.

When Stein repeats individual chapters, such as her repetition of “Chapter CLXII” on pages 141-143, she might also be presenting us with alternative versions of the text and a glimpse into her own writing process. Both Stein and Toklas sought to give the impression that Stein wrote all of her works in brilliant flashes of inspiration, that the texts we read were the first drafts that Stein wrote. In fact, as Ulla Dydo and Leon Katz have shown in their research on Stein’s manuscripts, Stein actually made many drafts of her work or at least portions of

her work. A Novel of Thank You might be an amalgamation of several drafts and thus a unique glimpse into her writing process.

An element of metafiction that Waugh, Hutcheon, and Boyd all stress is parody. Hutcheon writes, "Parody develops out of the realization of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention. Not merely an unmasking of a non-functioning system, it is also a necessary and creative process by which new forms appear to revitalize the tradition and open up new possibilities to the artist" (50). I do not see evidence of very much overt parody in A Novel of Thank You, but at times Stein does mimic and possibly poke some fun at her earlier style of narrative in The Making of Americans, a style which by 1925 she had abandoned. In "Chapter CLXXXVIII" Stein writes "This is the history of why they said will you or will you not" (160); in "Chapter CXCI" she writes "This is now to be the story of how she did not come again" (164); and in "Chapter CLXXIV," "This is now to be a very long history of their son and they were after a while their father" (148) referring, perhaps to the family saga. The phrases "This is the history . . ." or "This is now to be the story . . ." or "This is now to be a very long history . . ." are phrases that Stein often uses in The Making of Americans. In that novel, Stein expresses her intention to write a biography or history of everyone who has ever lived or will live by describing personality types, a program which she abandoned when she finished the novel. These very obvious references to that novel may be considered a form of self-parody.

Waugh writes that “Metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries” (29). In The Making of Americans, “beginning” appears as one of the more important ideas that Stein explores, and it is a quality possessed not only by many of the characters, but by the narrator/author. Sometimes this idea is explored explicitly: “To begin then again with a little description of feeling, thinking kinds in babies and in children, in understanding the being and kinds of being in men and women when they are in their beginning, when they are babies, when they are children” (MA 392). Other times it is less explicit, such as in Stein’s often-used colloquial phrase “As I was saying” which appears at the beginning of many of her paragraphs in the book and which ostensibly is employed to direct our attention back to whatever topic or character Stein is discussing after our attention has been diverted by one of her many digressions. This beginning again and again is one way in which Stein renders “each moment of present-perception as a dimensionless ‘now’” and we see this in much of Stein’s early work (Steiner 140-1).

In A Novel of Thank You, the notion of “beginning” is not as important as in The Making of Americans, but it does appear as a minor motif. Towards the end of “Chapter XLVII” we find “To begin now./ Once upon a time and usually they fastened it in that way that every now and then and awkwardly they saw that

they had better and at most two marriages” (NOTY 59). In “Chapter XLVII” we read, “She began. What did she begin. She began eating. What did she begin eating she began eating what she began eating and it was given to her that is to say it had been given to her. . . .” (21). And in “Chapter LXV,” “They have been unable to recover themselves and establish it as a certainty that there is no difference between a beginning and their beginning and their ending and an ending and likewise” (33-34).

A less explicit but possibly more important reference to beginnings comes at the very end of the novel. A Novel of Thank You is divided into three parts. Part One consists of the first 235 pages—almost the entire book—while Parts Two and Three are comprised of only the last three pages. Although these final two sections may seem like an epilogue compared to the bulk of Part One, Part Two actually resembles a prologue in terms of its content. The subject of Part Two is stated immediately:

Christening.

Having hindered christening by all of them follow following to be by this time who can be happening to be leaving it for this. Thank you very much for christening

Is it at all likely to keep on.

A great many are helped by this that it does not at all make it possible and said and thank you.

Beginning to be left to christening (237).

Stein then refers to the religious derivation of the word “christening” with a paragraph about Jews. Then she brings in imagery of entrances—doors and gates. At the end of Part Two Stein states the subject again: “Need it be that she liked it. This is to describe how having lost a pencil and regained it flowers were added not added afterwards but added before. This brings us back to this christening. What is it” (238). So here we find Stein thinking about beginning even as she is ending the novel. This idea of beginnings contributes to the larger theme of the inappropriateness of logical progression in the Steinian novel, a theme which I will explore in greater detail later in Chapter Four.

Read in terms of its metafictional qualities, A Novel of Thank You heralds a new era in Stein’s writing: an era of critical commentary and literary criticism. The reflexive elements outlined in this chapter are not the only examples of metafiction at work. Michael Boyd identifies collage as still another technique used in metafiction, and I believe that collage, more than any other technique, defines A Novel of Thank You as a metafiction and reveals the mimesis of process that is at work in this novel. I will leave the discussion of that point to the next chapter.

### CHAPTER THREE: COLLAGE

*Everything that will be said will have some connection with  
paper and amethysts with writing and silver and buttons and books.*

At its most basic level, collage may be defined as a technique in which an artist takes diverse and dissimilar objects and materials which one would not associate with traditional materials of pictorial representation and adds them to the surface of a work of art. Harold Rosenberg, categorizing collage not as a specific art form but as a technique that has traditionally been an activity for folk artists and amateurs, writes, "In itself, collage has no aesthetic or intellectual character: it has been employed for centuries to compose craft objects, such as arrangements of artificial fruits and flowers and colored papers, or to arouse surprise by sewing real buttons on a painted garment or inserting an actual clock in the tower of a landscape" (Rosenberg 59-60). Rosenberg goes on to say that "Collage opens art to the common stuff of daily life," thus destroying the distinction of art and nature as two separate realms (61). Collage can also juxtapose disparate elements which one might not expect to see in the same context. Max Ernst, the Surrealist collage artist, emphasized this sort of juxtaposition as the primary mechanism of collage:

A ready-made reality, whose naïve destination has the air of having been fixed, once and for all (a canoe), finding itself in the presence of another

and hardly less absurd reality (a vacuum cleaner), in a place where both of them must feel displaced (a forest), will, by this very fact, escape to its naïve destination and to its identity; it will pass from its false absolute, through a series of relative values, into a new absolute value, true and poetic: canoe and vacuum cleaner will make love (427).

In A Novel of Thank You, much of the textual material one finds appears to have come from Stein's daily life. When Michael Hoffman states that the novel reads like "a hermetic diary-commonplace book," in this sense he really is not too far off the mark (92). An early example comes in the third paragraph of "Chapter XXXVIII" where we find a portion of an advertisement for a housekeeper: "Miss Alice Toklas wishes to engage someone who will be reliable courteous and efficient" (15). A far more conspicuous example is the inclusion of the second and third paragraphs of "Composition as Explanation" in "Chapter CXLV." Maureen Liston posits that the verbatim inclusion of this passage was done "either because of the bearing their content has on the subject in question—narrative and novels or stories—or as a shorthand reference to the entire composition" (114).

In this novel about her own novel-writing, Stein includes several plans for stories early in the book. One is found in "Chapter LII":

Ida was twenty-five their brother was twenty and the sister was ten years old or a little older. And there was a father and a mother. The father was gentle but did not want his daughter to marry an Italian, the mother was a little younger and was getting very much older and she did not want her

daughter to marry less better than she was to marry later.

Stein develops this story idea still further and it becomes a story of separation:

They were never altogether. They never saw one another or had seen one another all together. This did not make the difference between one place and another one city and another one country and another one fountain and another one and one another and having lost a father and a mother they had one son and a daughter the son was older and another father and they had one daughter the daughter looked older and one mother the mother was as old as ever and one mother she was another mother and so much (67).

Other similar items seem to stand out from the text. Shortly before the “Composition as Explanation” passage, we find what seems to be a portion of a letter communicating Stein’s willingness to lecture in England: “I am taking it I [am] certain that you will be very pleased to have me tell you why I did thus and so. As you may easily know it is not at all difficult to remain here all the time” (114-5). There are rare moments of descriptive clarity which seem out of place in this so-called “hermetic” novel: “It was very early in the spring and a yellow butterfly which had flown was observed. Also it was to be noted that the trees which had put forth their buds had mistletoe in them which also was putting forth buds blossoms and berries. All this made the morning and the afternoon most delightful” (158).

Another possible instance of Stein’s incorporation of extrinsic materials into her novel are certain passages which may have been written by Alice Toklas.



Finding Toklas' handwriting in the manuscripts, Richard Bridgman was the first to suggest a "collaboration" between Stein and Toklas. Such a collaboration would support his argument that the novel "records a temporary imbalance" in Stein and Toklas' relationship:

While it is possible that she was merely taking dictation from Gertrude Stein, it is more reasonable to conclude that she actually participated in creating this account of a reconciliation. As Gertrude Stein specified, the book is "A novel of thank you and not about it" [(NOTY 185)]. In other words Gertrude Stein's gratitude was directly manifested, not merely described, by permitting Alice Toklas to share in the composition (211-12).

Maureen Liston, who conveniently lists all of the chapters in which Toklas' handwriting appears in the manuscripts (there are fourteen chapters in all), finds Bridgman's hypothesis "feasible and satisfying" but "considering Stein's method of composition during this period, however, one could also propose that Toklas was perhaps transcribing passages from scraps of paper into the notebooks" (54n). Linda Simon, in The Biography of Alice B. Toklas, disagrees with Bridgman, arguing that "The passages . . . in Alice's handwriting do not differ stylistically from Gertrude's" (185). Ulla Dydo, in an illuminating article concerning Stein's notebooks and manuscripts, also disagrees: "Where Toklas' hand is visible in the manuscripts. . . it is because she copied, not because she composed" (90). For the most part, Simon and Dydo are correct. Most of the chapters which Liston identifies as including Toklas' handwriting are so stylistically similar to the rest of

Stein's writing that without looking at the manuscript ourselves, we would never suspect the possibility of Toklas' involvement in the composition of the text.

However, an interesting exception occurs on page 165. Here we find two short chapters next to each other:

#### Chapter CXCII

Daily daily every day what did they say.

#### Chapter CXCI

There are two kinds of liars the kind that lie and the kind that don't lie the kind that lie are no good.

According to Liston, both of these chapters were written in Toklas' handwriting (192). The first chapter is stylistically indistinguishable from the rest of Stein's writing in this novel. The aphoristic sentence of the second chapter, however, stands out—primarily because it makes sense. It also catches our attention because of the use of the word “don't”; Stein rarely used contractions in her writing during this period of her career. It may very well be that these are Toklas' words which Stein decided to keep in her book. Ulla Dydo admits that Toklas was at the center of Stein's creative process, doing much more than typing and proofreading:

Occasionally [Toklas] wrote answers to Stein's notes. Some pick up Stein's ideas, her banter or her humor, but others play in various styles with Toklas' own ideas. All are supportive. “A question mark is not admitted by us moderns,” she comments after Stein questions whether she can make

her happy. "Practice makes perfect/ Practice in appreciation makes perfect appreciation," Stein writes, and Toklas responds, "Lu et approve" [sic] (87).

Although Toklas' involvement in the creative portion of Stein's work was, most of the time, non-existent according to Simon and Dydo, in A Novel of Thank You, which opens up the processes of Stein's literary production, it does not seem so unlikely that Stein would allow Toklas to enter into the text in some real way.

Probably the most obvious stylistic similarity between collage and A Novel of Thank You is the discontinuity of the text, suggesting that it is just an assortment of ideas and subjects thrown together. Joel Thompson Argote, in arguing for the presence of collage techniques in Rimbaud's Illuminations, states that the easiest way to simulate the effect of collage with words is through the juxtaposition of either fragments of language or fragmented images (200). One of the things which makes a work like Tender Buttons so different from what Stein had written before is the use of a larger vocabulary and more "exotic" words which are combined like fragments that do not make complete sense when read as a whole. Here is a sample from "Objects":

#### A METHOD OF A CLOAK

A single climb to a line, a straight exchange to a cane, a desperate adventure and courage and a clock, all this which is a system, which has feeling, which has resignation and success, all makes an attractive black silver (SW 465).

We see here several juxtapositions of words which are either antonymous or at least are words which we would not usually associate with one another: method/cloak, desperate/adventure, resignation/success, black/silver. This is, essentially, what collage does: combine items (in this case words) which we would not normally expect to see together. Stein eases the shock of these combinations with rhymes and puns, some of which we see in the passage above: “cloak” and “clock,” “climb” and “line,” “exchange” and “cane.”

In A Novel of Thank You, almost all of the chapters, as Maureen Liston has argued and as I have already demonstrated, may be read as autonomous pieces assigned particular chapter numbers which do not always follow a strict chronological sequence. But even within the chapters themselves we find this discontinuity; Stein’s paragraphs jump from subject to subject, idea to idea, as we see, for example, in “Chapter CCLXXXIII”:

Once they came to stay and shortly once they came to be asked why is there more than there was if you had three sons and a daughter.

Begin jealously to arrange the leaves where they are in tulips where they are in tulips where they are where they are in tulips.

This will if you please this will if you please if you please this will this will this will if you please please if you please this will this will if you please.

Might it be theirs by choice (221).

Even within sentences Stein will change her train of thought: “Then seeing them

sitting sitting is in standing wholly, wholly and in replace replacing stretches stretches by this as that and for that to be with it as a chance a chance when when they had been behind it to be broken broken can be for that when they knew after a time to be so" (178).

In the twentieth century, there have been many attempts to combine literature and collage. The artist Max Ernst, beginning in 1929, published three collage "novels" which combined both pictorial and verbal elements in book form. Many writers, including many of Stein's Modernist contemporaries, at one time or another, have been credited with employing collage methodology. In most cases the comparison to collage has been prompted because these writers insert disparate texts and stylistic techniques that we may not expect to find in a literary work. James Joyce's "Aeolus" chapter from Ulysses is an often-cited example. Here, the imitation newspaper headlines which break up the narrative of the chapter comment upon the action in the chapter just as newspaper headlines in Cubist collage sometimes comment upon the collages in which they are found (Loss 178). Ezra Pound's Cantos is an even better example. Like the collages of Picasso and the other Cubists, "the dynamic quality of the art arises from the 'relations . . . between' elements, the juxtaposition of discrete and oftentimes incongruous visual and verbal details" (Pecorino 162). T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land contains quotations from and allusions to Christian and Hindu theology, Renaissance drama, nursery rhymes, popular songs, Dante, Whitman and various other sources as he presents his view of the decline of western civilization. Dos Passos' U.S.A.

trilogy combines four distinct modes of narration: a realistic narrative of the twelve main characters of the trilogy; assorted prose poem biographies of major twentieth century American public figures; newsreels which contain real-life newspaper headlines, portions of text, advertising slogans, and popular song lyrics; and stream-of-consciousness “Camera Eyes” in which Dos Passos relates his own memories and subjective experiences (Pizer 56). Rimbaud’s Illuminations attract the comparison to collage, not only because they use “a mixture of realities belonging to different orders” (Argote 202), but also by juxtaposing “sentences, words, and images in such a way as to transgress well-established grammatical and syntactic boundaries” (201), and by “reformulat[ing] language as visual” even as “collage reformulates the visual as language” (203). The style of William S. Burroughs’ novels involve an “intersecting network of many texts spliced, crossed, and merged” (Lydenberg 46), and he invented specific techniques designed specifically for writing, such as the “cut-up” and “fold-in” techniques, which allowed him “to bring . . . the collage to writing” (44).

But unlike these writers who are credited with using collage in their work, Stein is different in that she was a first-hand witness to the development of collage in modern art. Like Gertrude Stein, who tried her hand at virtually every literary genre available to her, even resurrecting some genres, such as literary portraiture, Picasso branched out into other genres of the visual arts. It was her lifelong friend Picasso and his partner in Cubism Georges Braque who, beginning in 1912, started experimenting with the technique of collage, which, though centuries old, had

never found a place within the tradition of “serious” Western art. Picasso and Braque perfected a specific kind of collage called papier collé. This term refers to the almost-exclusive use of pasted papers, such as newspaper, tickets, and calling cards, as well as imitations of wood or marble which were painted onto strips of paper before they were applied to the picture (Rosenblum 68). Stein not only saw their work, she even owned six of Picasso’s papiers collés, including Still Life with Calling Card (1914) and Student with a Pipe (1913), at least four of which remained in her possession until her death in 1946. She also owned The Architect’s Table (1912), a painting from the late Analytic phase of Cubism, which anticipates collage with its stenciled letters and a pictorial representation of Gertrude Stein’s calling card. I believe that this collage revolution not only had an impact on twentieth-century art, but it also had an enormous impact on Stein’s own writing for two decades following 1912, an impact which one can see in A Novel of Thank You.

Establishing connections between Picasso’s paintings and Stein’s writings is, of course, not new in Stein criticism. Most critics readily agree that Stein was influenced by Cubism, a painting style which expresses many of the philosophical and psychological ideas that Stein had acquired from William James during her years at Radcliffe. However, the question that Stein’s critics often pose is, how strong is this analogy? Marianne DeKoven, in a 1981 article, makes a persuasive argument against what has become known as Stein’s “literary cubism.” Although

DeKoven does not dispute that “Gertrude Stein’s writing was undoubtedly influenced by the modes of modern painting she helped to discover and promulgate,” she questions the claim that Cubism was the source of Stein’s peculiar style (81). She argues that the very nature of the different media of creation—painting and writing—frustrate any analogy that might be used to compare them:

A painted shape, unlike a word, has only two potential degrees of meaning: referential or abstract. Either it refers recognizably to an anterior object, something we might say the painting is “of,” or it has only the emotional, spiritual suggestiveness of musical tones, along with its formal compositional significance, as in abstract expressionism. Words, on the other hand, may or may not be used in an intentionally referential way—to say something coherent about a particular subject—but they always retain the lexical meanings they carry in the language (85).

DeKoven goes on to write that “a first reading of Tender Buttons seldom suggests any immediate connection between the actual writing and its ostensible subject, while it is clear at first glance that cubist compositions are structured around the fragmentation of their representational elements,” and then she invites us to compare a passage from Tender Buttons with a specific painting by Picasso: his portrait of Henry-David Kahnweiler (87).

It is here that we encounter a flaw in DeKoven’s argument. Tender Buttons marks an important shift in the style of Stein’s writing from what she had been



writing during the Analytical phase of Picasso's Cubism. Indeed, the notion that Stein was influenced or inspired by the work of Picasso gains support when we consider that the first important shift in Stein's style of writing—the shift from (what Stein would later refer to as) the *prose* of Three Lives and The Making of Americans to (again, what Stein would later refer to as) the *poetry* of Tender Buttons and her mid-1910s literary portraits—coincides almost exactly with an important shift in Picasso's work: a shift from Analytical Cubism to collage. To compare Tender Buttons with the 1910 portrait of Kahnweiler is a poor analogy. A more profitable comparison, if we are to take the connection between Picasso's art and Stein's writing seriously, as I think we should, would be to compare Tender Buttons with those works which Picasso was producing at about the same time. This would mean comparing Tender Buttons not with Kahnweiler's portrait, but to Picasso's early *papiers collés*.

Cubism generates the same sort of reflexivity that we see in metafiction because the subject of all Cubist painting is, to a large extent, painting itself. Cubism is concerned with the problems of form and space inherent in Realist art (Gray 45), and it emphasizes the role of the artist in a painting's creation (91). One aspect of painting which Picasso and the Cubists emphasized during the Analytic phase was the ultimate two-dimensionality of a painting. Although a painting may give the illusion of three-dimensionality, as if the observer were looking through a window at another reality, a Cubist painting sought "to spell

out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat, even though at the same time it had to overcome this proclaimed flatness as an aesthetic fact and continue to report nature” (Greenberg 68). Robert Rosenblum describes how fragmentation in Cubist paintings results in an ambiguity that upsets the volume and mass of the Cubists’ subjects:

As in the aesthetic and structural innovations of contemporary architecture, in which transparent glass planes and free-standing walls both define a volume and belie that definition by implying a fusion with the space around it, the precise boundaries of the contours that describe the model and her mandolin [in Girl with Mandolin (1910)] cannot be located with visual certainty. In this unstable world of bodiless yet palpable shapes, the integrity of matter undergoes an assault comparable to that made on the once indivisible atom. The contours of hair, for example, destroy the solidity of the head by merging with the planes that describe the adjacent space, just as the bent elbows seem to dematerialize in their translucent ambiance (42-3).

Cubist fragmentation fosters two-dimensionality because it denies clear distinctions between what is in the foreground and what is in the background. Unfortunately, extreme fragmentation also leads towards abstraction, which Picasso and Braque wanted to avoid. So by 1911, they began experimenting with other ways to acknowledge the actual flatness of the picture. Rosenblum writes:

. . . it was inevitable that Cubism would evolve an increasingly acute

consciousness of the two-dimensional reality of the picture surface that Renaissance perspective had succeeded in disguising. In the Portuguese and Ma Jolie, space has been so contracted that a new kind of pictorial syntax is created. The overlapping planes and their complicated light and shadow imply relationships in an illusory depth, yet each plane is committed to a contact with the picture surface. The printed symbols appear to shift and fade in space, yet, at the same time, they rest as flatly upon the opaque plane of the canvas as printed letters on a page. Once again, the constant rearrangement and shuffling of spatial layers in these pictures call explicit attention to the paradoxical process of picture making. The traditional illusionistic devices of textural variation and chiaroscuro are simultaneously contradicted by the subordination of each pictorial element to the sovereignty of the flat picture surface (66).

In 1911, Braque began stenciling letters and numbers onto the surface of his paintings, and Picasso soon began doing the same (Fauchereau 15). Perhaps more than any other device of the Analytic phase, these stenciled “inscriptions indicated the total absence of depth of the painted surface, but likewise underlined at the same time the picture’s aspect as an object, something manufactured” (15).

By early 1912, Picasso and Braque began looking for new ways “to emphasize the surface still further in order to prevent it from fusing with the illusion” and so they began pasting pieces of wallpaper, cloth and other materials to their paintings, creating their first collages (Rosenblum 71). Collage, more than

anything attempted in Analytic Cubism, accentuates two-dimensionality.

With its evacuation from the pictorial field of wave upon wave of modeling, of the cacophony of slightly canted planes, collage completely ironed out the fabric of illusionism, rendering the object's existence within the visual field as inexorably flat as an insect crushed between two planes of glass. Nothing can be seen to turn within the vise of this frontal display: no rotation, no obliquity, no slide from luminous highlight into the cool of shadowed depths. In collage in general such frontality is secured by the way the paper elements glued to the surface of the sheet are literally foursquare upon that surface, an inevitable result of their very flatness. But in the geometry of Picasso's very first series of *papiers collés* we can see how specifically this frontality is insisted upon . . . (Krauss 262).

Collage reflexively emphasizes the work of art as a work of art—as an object rather than a window through which one can view an objective reality. This is similar to the effect that Stein's style of writing in *A Novel of Thank You* and similar works has on the reader. The incomprehensibility, or “hermeticism,” of Stein's writing calls attention to the fact that we are reading a book and are not being transported into another reality. When one reads a conventional novel with a story and characters, one's mind is encouraged to imagine the events described in the text as if they really happened. As one reads and is drawn into the story, one loses the awareness that one is really just looking at a long string of printed

words on paper and instead perceives the text as a window through which one can visit another reality. If the author is especially skilled in his description, the reader might even be fooled into believing that the fictional characters are real, or that the fictional events have actually transpired. In A Novel of Thank You, Stein tries not to allow this illusion to take hold, and even when it does occur Stein does not sustain it for very long. What makes A Novel of Thank You difficult to read is that it emphasizes its material existence as 237 pages of printed words. The experience the reader enjoys (or perhaps does not enjoy) is that of simply reading words, and not the exciting or interesting events of a more conventional novel. Just as the Cubists dispel the illusion of a three-dimensional reality behind the two-dimensional picture plane, so does Stein dispel the illusion of an alternate reality behind the words of her text.

This blending of strictly denotative and potentially connotative words was first adopted sometime around 1912. Prior to 1912, when Stein imagined herself to be primarily a novelist, her writing was dominated by verbs, gerunds, and extremely vague pronouns; she rarely used nouns to name specific objects or ideas. After 1912, Stein began including far more precise nouns in her writing. At the same time, she abandoned novel-writing and branched out into portraits, plays, and poetry. In fact, she later referred to this new writing style as *poetry*. In her essay "Poetry and Grammar," she describes the difference between prose and poetry:

Poetry has to do with vocabulary just as prose has not.

So you see prose and poetry are not at all alike. They are completely different.

Poetry is I say essentially a vocabulary just as prose is essentially not.

And what is the vocabulary of which poetry absolutely is. It is a vocabulary entirely based on the noun as prose is essentially and determinately and vigorously not based on the noun.

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun.” (WII 327)

Prior to 1912, Stein avoided using nouns in her work as much as possible because she did not find them interesting. “Nouns are the name of anything,” she wrote, “and just naming names is alright when you want to call a roll but is it any good for anything else” (313-4). Early in her career, Stein did not think they were useful, but by 1912 she began to realize the connotative possibilities of the noun.

I had always been very impressed from the time that I was very young by having had it told me and then afterwards feeling it myself that Shakespeare in the forest of Arden had created a forest without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name its names.

Now that was a thing that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known

its name anything's name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new." (WII 330)

Nouns, then, can be used not only to name those things to which they denotatively refer, but they can be used to connotatively refer to other things or ideas. This, for Stein, is poetry.

One way in which we might think about the text of Tender Buttons or A Novel of Thank You is as a vast field of strictly denotative words—words such as articles, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, relative pronouns, and personal pronouns without antecedents—upon which Stein sets a small number of highly connotative words—words which invoke different meanings throughout their use in the text. This unique method of word choice is one of the things which makes A Novel of Thank You, and indeed most of Stein's writing from the 1910s and 20s, so difficult to read and which gives the text an introspective feel.

In Cubist collage, the materials affixed to the surface of the canvas are not limited to a single meaning. For example, a strip of newspaper pasted to the canvas can refer to and represent the whole newspaper from which it is taken. But the strip can also refer to the flatness of the canvas, and the printed words on the strip can refer to events extraneous to the subject matter of the papier collé as some of the strips of newspaper Picasso and Braque used contained stories about war or political and social unrest. Thus, the collage materials are polysemantic, able to have attached to them many different meanings. Gertrude Stein, in 1912,

begins to use words, especially nouns, in the same polysemantic way, and the effect that this has on her writing after 1912 is nothing less than revolutionary. By using words as signs that refer to more than their denotative meanings, Stein can inject presence into her work in a way that she could not before.

Of all of the various critical theories which have been used to explicate Stein's vast canon of work, including feminist criticism, psychological criticism, and deconstruction, I believe that structuralism is the most helpful in understanding Stein's experimental work from the 1910s and 1920s. I am not alone in this belief. Wendy Steiner and Randa Dubnick both apply structuralist ideas in their books to an analysis of Stein's work, in the first case to Stein's literary portraiture, and in the second to a variety of her major works. I argue that taking a structuralist approach to A Novel of Thank You is the best way to illustrate how the method of collage plays a dominant role in Stein's metafictional program.

As far as Cubist collage is concerned, a number of art historians have lately called upon structuralism and semiotics to better understand Picasso and Braque's use of extraneous items in their work during the early 1910s. In her article on collage, Wendy Holmes begins, "As juxtapositions of fragments of language and fragmented images, *trompe-l'oeil* illusions, real things, and things that are illusions, the great early Cubist collages of Braque and Picasso are generally recognized as configurations of extreme semiotic density" (193). To develop their arguments, noted art historians such as Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss, and



Robert Rosenblum call upon the ideas and terminology of major structuralists: Saussure, Peirce, Jakobson, Bakhtin, and Barthes. Such reliance on so many structuralists' models can be confusing. For my purposes here, I will try to restrict my terminology to that of Saussure, although the ideas I take from Bois, Krauss, and Rosenblum might be grounded in the other semiologists.

Saussure's fundamental ideas are rather simple, but they are important because they are the foundation upon which many later semiologists and linguists have based their work. At the heart of Saussure's system is the linguistic *sign*. The sign is made up of two components, the *signifier* (a sound image, such as a word, and the psychological imprint it invokes as it is perceived by our senses) (Saussure 66) and the *signified* (the concept to which the signifier refers) (67). Saussure describes the bond between signifier and signified as an arbitrary one. Except in rare exceptions, such as onomatopoeic words, "any signified concept is not linked to any inner relationship to the succession of sounds in the signifier" (67). Also of importance is Saussure's view of language as a "unified 'field'" and "a self-sufficient system" in which every part is related to every other part:

Saussure's insistence on the importance of the *synchronic* as distinct from the *diachronic* study of language was momentous because it involved recognition of language's current structural properties as well as its *historical* dimensions. As Fredric Jameson puts it 'Saussure's originality was to have insisted on the fact that language as a total system is complete at every moment, no matter what happens to have been altered in it a

moment before.' Each language, that is, has a wholly valid existence *apart* from its history, as a system of sounds issuing from the lips of those who speak it now, and whose speech in fact constructs and constitutes the language (usually in ignorance of its history) in its present form (Hawkes 20).

Saussure believed that systems of “auditory signifiers [such as words] have at their command only the dimension of time” while “visual signifiers [such as the elements in a painting] can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions” (Saussure 70). But Stein, always seeking to eliminate time from her work, sought to achieve that same sort of simultaneity which painters enjoy.

According to Saussure, signs are formed by an arbitrary bond between signifier and signified, but signs also derive significance when they are placed in relation to other signs. For example, the word “Napoleon” outside of any context will most likely refer to the historical figure Napoleon. However, when Stein uses the word “Napoleon” in her second portrait of Picasso “If I Told Him” (“If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him./ Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.”) it takes on new meanings. No longer is Stein referring exclusively to Napoleon the historical figure, but to some aspect of Picasso which brings to mind Napoleon. Stein uses this sign again in A Novel of Thank You: “Having asked him to be Napoleon I very much regret having asked him to be Napoleon” (168). Another example is Stein and Toklas’ calling card which Picasso pastes to his canvas in Still Life with Calling Card. By

itself, the calling card is exactly that—a calling card, but when Picasso adds it to his collage it acquires a new value as an element in a work of art, as do all of the everyday items which Picasso used.

In a number of Picasso's pre-Cubist works, William Rubin observes what he terms "a transmigration of forms—where forms that remain constant pass to new identities" (623). For example, what may begin as a drawing of a man in a sketch might end as a collection of other objects (a loaf of bread in place of an arm, drapery or a bowl of fruit for a torso) in the final painting. Often, these signs, whose forms resemble the features of the original subject, were denotatively empty. When Picasso began collecting and studying African masks and other tribal sculpture, he and other early-twentieth-century painters "knew nothing of their real context, function or meaning." This allowed Picasso to attach whatever meaning to these signs best fit his needs (633). In fact, signs were often switched not because the new sign carried the same denotative or connotative meaning as that which it replaced, but simply because it resembled the former subject in form or shape (624).

Stein's word choices are in some ways similar to Picasso's substitution of signs in his pre-Cubist work. She too associates words which appear to have little in common except their "form"—their appearance on the page and their sounds when they are spoken. One relevant example which I will explore in greater depth in the next chapter is Stein's association of the words "thank" and "think," but one may just as easily cite Stein's frequent use of puns. More often, however, Stein

takes a word, decontextualizes it and strips it of its denotative meaning. Then, she places it in a new context where it is defined by the connotations it derives from its new context. For example, here is another excerpt from Tender Buttons, one which is often cited by feminist critics:

#### A PETTICOAT

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm (SW 471).

Considered individually, each of these noun phrases have nothing obviously in common with one another, but when their denotative meanings are stripped from them, as they are here, and the reader is forced to read them connotatively, together they carry a potentially sexual signification.

Yve-Alain Bois traces the development of semiological ideas in Picasso's Cubist work. Semiology, Bois argues, is not alien to the understanding of the visual arts: "The idea that painting is a language of sorts, made of signs governed by codes which are historically changing, entrusted with the task of interpreting reality and not merely 'copying' it, had been central to studio discussions and philosophical tracts" prior to the twentieth century. As a result, "what we could call a 'semiological attitude' had been at the core of what is usually called Cubism right from the start" (Bois 175). Throughout, Bois develops an analogy between painting and writing, arguing that Picasso's collages transform visual art into something similar to literature:

in order to use 'real' objects in a work of art (hence 'real' objects as signs), one must have had first to recognize the differential nature of the sign. Still

Life with Chair Caning (1912) [Picasso's first collage], thus, is a transitional work, a limit-case. It masks the moment when something is about to topple, for in the collapse of the vertical and the horizontal, what Picasso is inscribing is the very possibility of the transformation of painting into writing—of the empirical and vertical space of vision, controlled by our own erect position on the ground, into the semiological and possibly horizontal space of reading" (186-7).

One of the important points which Bois makes with regard to Picasso's use of signs is that Picasso sought to reduce the number of signs in his work while maintaining the diverse significations of those signs. Bois draws on Saussure's idea that signs are flexible and can carry multiple significations, especially in sign systems where there are very few signs. In other words, if there are only two signs in a system, those two signs must carry all of the significations. Conversely, Bois writes, "The more differentiated the value system is, the less ambiguous or rich will be the sign and the more rigid the rules governing the creation of new signs. The more open the system is, on the contrary, the greater the possibility of inventing new signs and, more important, of having the same sign performing entirely different significations" (174). Bois goes on to link this idea to Picasso's *papiers collés*: "if the same sign can be used to denote the neck of a bottle, of a guitar and of a person, part of the meaning of the works in which this sign occurs will be that a bottle is like a guitar is like a face" (174).

On the surface, this description of Picasso's use of signs in his work might best be compared with Stein's earlier, pre-1912 writing in which there is a great deal of repetition and fewer words (signs). But although Stein restricts her vocabulary in these early works to only a few words which she repeats over and over again, these words that she does use maintain their denotative meanings. When Stein writes in her 1909 portrait of Picasso that Picasso was "One whom some were following was one who was completely charming," she means precisely that (SW 333). On the other hand, when Stein writes in her 1913 portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire, "Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pore state at" one must treat each of her words as individual signs which may potentially (or *necessarily*, if we want this line to make any sense) mean more than their dictionary definitions (WI 385). As I have said before, one may think of A Novel of Thank You as a vast field of words, most of which are used denotatively, upon which are set a limited number of highly connotative words which Stein uses in a variety of contexts throughout the book. In "Chapter CXXI" of A Novel of Thank You, Stein demonstrates her awareness that words can be used as signs to signify a variety of meanings and connotations and that this may be a useful approach to take when reading this novel:

... from now on everything that is said will have some connection.

Everything that will be said in connection with porters will also have the same meaning in connection with carriers and subjects and animals and advancing and retiring and going and coming and returning and collecting.

Everything that will be said will have some connection with paper and amethysts with writing and silver and silver with buttons and books. In this way she knows what I mean and he knows what I mean and I know what I mean (114).

In the next chapter, I will show how Stein uses several connotatively-rich motifs to carry specific significations relevant to her metafictional program in A Novel of Thank You. These significations may be described as the “themes” of the book, and it is these ideas which are most important in the novel.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MOTIFS

*It can easily be remembered that a novel is everything.*

Although in the second chapter of this thesis I cited several ways in which A Novel of Thank You resembles other metafictional novels, Gertrude Stein's unique style of writing from the 1920s precludes any strict adherence to common metafictional techniques. To put it simply, Stein's writing is so different from any literature that had come before, or has appeared since, that we need to modify, and perhaps even invent, methods of literary analysis before we can begin to adequately approach her work. Indeed, how can we accurately apply poetry terminology to Stanzas in Meditation, or opera terminology to Four Saints in Three Acts when such works are so unlike any poetry or opera that has ever been written? And how do we apply metafictional terminology to A Novel of Thank You when it is so unlike any metafiction (or even any novel) that has ever been written?

Sarah Lauzen, in a 1986 essay, tries to delineate the devices that most metafictional texts employ. She discusses the use of such familiar fiction elements as point of view, language, plot, setting, characterization, and so on. For each of these she lists several metafictional texts and cites examples of how authors altered



the conventional elements of fiction to serve their own metafictional purposes. For one important element—theme—Lauzen has very little to say: “Considering its prominence in conventional fiction, theme plays a surprisingly small role in metafiction” (102). Perhaps so, but in A Novel of Thank You, theme is the key to understanding the statements Stein is making about her own novel-writing.

An obvious question must therefore be, “In a novel in which it so difficult even to find a plot, how can a reader be certain with any confidence that he knows what the themes are or even how to identify them?” On its denotative surface, A Novel of Thank You is little more than a confused jumble of words. Portions of the text seem to make sense, but as a whole it does not. However, there are some words which, like objects on the surface of a collage, serve a larger purpose than their denotative function. But how do we know which words carry the important connotations and which ones do not? In Tender Buttons, the matter was simpler: there it was mostly the nouns, and some of the adjectives, to which Stein wanted to draw our attention. By 1926, Stein was less interested in emphasizing the novelty of words, so to make certain words stand out she returned to repeating them as she had done before 1912. Stein had, of course, relied on repetition early in her career, although Stein preferred not to use the word “repetition” to describe her style. As she explained in “Portraits and Repetition,” “Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition” (WII 288). To illustrate the distinction, she cites some common examples:

It is very like a frog hopping he cannot hop exactly the same distance or the

same way of hopping at every hop. A bird's singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence. That is the human expression saying the same thing and insisting and we all insist varying the emphasizing (288).

Stein used insistence in The Making of Americans and her earliest portraits as a way to indicate slight changes in time (DeKoven 52). Marianne DeKoven believes that insistence had another important effect that reaches beyond Stein's examination of the continuous present. In The Making of Americans, as in A Novel of Thank You, Stein's "emblematic words . . . become almost entirely disembodied, deprived of the complex of reference and association." Stein "provides a skeleton of coherent, referential meaning, which the reader must flesh out according to his or her imagination and experience, as in Barthes' 'writerly' text, where the reader shares equally with the author the work of writing" (56). This active approach, which I believe is the best approach to take when reading A Novel of Thank You, contrasts with the more passive approach Maureen Liston recommends.

However, the reader of A Novel of Thank You is not left to plug in whatever connotations he wants for whatever words he chooses from the text. As one reads A Novel of Thank You, one can detect certain words and phrases which are repeated more often than others. I call these words and phrases "motifs." Probably the most obvious of these is the word "novel" which is repeated, or insisted upon, throughout the book. This word, as I have argued already,

announces Stein's metafictional purpose and prompts us to watch for other examples of self-referentiality in the text. There are many, but the most important are found in the several other motifs that one encounters in this novel. These motifs signify the broader themes which are of concern for Stein as she writes her novels, and in A Novel of Thank You, these metafictional themes are what Stein insists upon.

In A Novel of Thank You, there are four motifs which signify larger themes present in much of Stein's writing and especially her fiction. These motifs include "numbers," "names," "arrangements," and "thank you." "Numbers" refers to the new intellectual ideas developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which inspired the Modernist writers and artists, including Stein, leading to new methods of expression. "Names" reveals Stein's method of character creation and it serves as an example of the use of signs in her work. "Arranging" demonstrates how A Novel of Thank You and other so-called "hermetic" works are not products of some automatic writing technique, but are rather the products of conscious creative endeavor. Finally, "thank you" reveals the personal side of this novel, and through this motif we can observe Stein's own ambitions, anxieties, and frustrations she felt for her work.

By limiting my discussion to these four motifs, I do not mean to suggest that these four are the *only* motifs at play in A Novel of Thank You. There are several more that one can identify, including "at once," "change," "supposing," and "time." However, these and other motifs may be subordinated into the four I will discuss, and at any rate, I believe that the four I plan to discuss have the most

to offer in an analysis such as this. Let us now consider each of the four motifs mentioned above to show how these motifs rise to the level of metafictional themes.

# 1.

## *Let one imagine forty*—A Novel of Numbers

The most conspicuous motif that one encounters in the opening pages of A Novel of Thank You is the “numbers” motif. In fact, the very first sentence of the book is a question which asks, “How many more than two are there.” As we continue reading this same first page, we find two more examples of the motif. In chapter “Described” we read “In the rest of all eighty of all eighty and of all eighty, of all eighty and of all eighty and in the rest, the rest of all eighty” and in chapter “Country” we find “Fourteen cities are larger there than here” (3). Of course, all printed novels make use of numbers in some small way. If nothing else, one can find them in chapter titles or as page numbers. But in A Novel of Thank You Stein employs numbers within her text with the same mathematical connotations which we would assign to them were we looking at them in an equation instead of a novel.

Ellen Berry reads Stein’s use of numbers in A Novel of Thank You as an expression of a love-triangle plot—a story idea which does seem to be present in the early part of the novel. Berry centers Stein’s use of numbers around the number three. Although the numbers do not obviously “form relationships with other segments of the text, they do serve to foreground numbers until, by the end

of the novel, ones, twos, and threes have assumed, through sheer repetition at a subtextual level, the force of an obsession” (Berry 74). Maureen Liston also notices Stein’s use of numbers, but thinks that twos as well as threes are the numbers to pay most attention to (63). I think ones, twos, threes, and fours are the most important numbers Stein uses, and she often combines and contrasts these four numbers more than any other set of numbers in her text, as in “Afterwards there was the arrangement that while some repeat all repeat two and two two and two four. Four and four four and four. Two” (28) or “Supposing four sisters are older. Two sisters might be between twenty-five and thirty-five. Four sisters might be between twenty-five and thirty-five. Four sisters. Four sisters need not be here. No they need not be here. They were divided into one and three” (112). Furthermore, these four numbers are easily punned upon with those simple words one finds in abundance in all of Stein’s writing: “at once,” “to” and “too,” “there” and “their,” and “for.” And Liston observes that Stein seldom uses words longer than four syllables (64).

Sometimes Stein engages in what I call “counting,” a technique she uses in other important 1920s works such as Four Saints in Three Acts and Lucy Church Amiably. At times this counting is obvious, “One two three four five six seven eight nine. One two three four five six seven eight. One two three four. One two three four five six” (NOTY 84). On other occasions Stein incorporates counting into a more conventional text:

Sixteen. First, would they need wood. Second would two push or shove

well if neither one was strong. Third is there likely to be a way to point it out to him. Fourth when they are out they are one and two and not a wife. Fifth it might be that a year ago white a year ago and white when above. Sixth when it fell a few fell and later he asked them to be very good now. Seventh it was raining. Eighth ask how many times women wash for them for her. Ninth on account of wild flowers. Tenth was she ready to like silver in a pitcher. Eleventh pansies and so so. Twelfth undoubtedly as late. Thirteenth does it make a difference if all there dress differently. Fourteenth cannot see Lucy. Fifteenth two vegetables. Sixteenth and all the same (27).

More frequently than counting, in A Novel of Thank You we also find what might be best termed “calculations.” Sometimes the calculations are mathematically correct: “fifty and forty makes ninety. Forty and fifty makes ninety and forty and fifty makes ninety” (31) and “Supposing choosing four each four two times four is eight and opposite to four” (96). Usually, however, Stein’s calculations are not mathematically correct: “Could eight make six and after that five and then three” (40), “that is the way they say that fifty is more than seventy and seventy more than forty and seventy-five seventy-five is as much as that” (69), and “Would they learn that forty and forty made forty-four” (85).

I believe that Stein’s counting and calculations in A Novel of Thank You refer to certain specific developments in what may be described as the Modernist intellectualism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These years saw

a renewed interest among mathematicians and philosophers is the same question that Stein raises when she writes, “How to explain numbers. All numbers, every number every number and a number” (4). Specifically, they sought some means to categorize the various infinities of numbers that are found on the number line, not just the whole numbers, but also the fractions and irrational numbers that lay hidden between these whole numbers. In other words, “If it were true that irrational numbers lay hidden between the whole numbers and the rational fractions, how many parts did a line have? How often could one subdivide a line, and how many numbers were there really between zero and one?” (Everdell 33). Such questions had been raised as early as the ancient Greeks, but in the 19th century answers had still not been found. However, mathematicians such as Dedekind, Cantor and Frege sought positivist solutions to these problems which they hoped would “define ‘counting’ rigorously, something the positivists had long hoped for, since, if their program were correct, the process of counting and a definition of the integers should be all that was needed to lay a rock solid foundation for all mathematics” (Everdell 40). What they developed was set theory, and for the last two decades of the 19th century, mathematicians and philosophers tried in vain to smooth over the inconsistencies and contradictions which set theory posed. One of these philosophers was Bertrand Russell, who, in 1901, prepared to publish a book which he hoped would bring set theory into a consistent and workable structure. Instead, by 1902, he had uncovered a paradox (later called “Russell’s Paradox”) which threatened not only the foundations of set

theory, but of logic and arithmetic itself (182). Enter, then, that familiar personality who always seems to be present whenever important developments in Modernism occur. While Russell and his wife were on vacation in the English countryside:

Neither the theory nor the stay inspired hope. Russell was a bit less gloomy in September 1902, when his Fernhurst neighbor, Bernard Berenson, introduced him to a bright young art lover from America and his sister Gertrude Stein. Russell debated American culture with Gertrude. Not long after, Russell was writing to Couturat, admitting the paradox to him for the first time . . .” (184).

But what does set theory have to do with novel-writing? And why, even if Stein were not interested in the dry details of mathematics, would she have used numbers as an important sign in A Novel of Thank You? One might wonder why a woman with as sharp an analytical mind as Stein, who studied philosophy while at Radcliffe, and who went on to pursue a medical degree, would treat numbers with such flippant disregard. The answer is that for nineteenth-century positivism, the number line represents a kind of linear continuity that is upset by most Modernist artists and intellectuals, including Stein in her novel The Making of Americans.

It was at Radcliffe, in William James’ classroom, where Stein’s interest and intellectual foundation in science and logic was laid. Linking Stein’s work to William James’ psychological theories is common in Stein criticism, but such



links are often applied to Stein's earliest work only. In fact, Stein seems to have held James in high esteem throughout her life. In her final novel, Brewsie and Willie, Stein still draws upon James as a source of intellectual inspiration:

Sure, Brewsie you're right but in a kind of way we wont die, we'll just all somehow go on living, that's it Brewsie, that's it that is what is the matter with thinking, that's it, no matter what does happen everybody somehow goes on living, and there always seem to be lots more of them lots more than anybody needs but they all go on living. Yes, said Donald Paul, that is what William James called the will to live (WII 763).

In his famous chapter on what he called the stream of thought, James categorized thought as existing in constant change. By this he meant not that no state of mind ever lasts more than an instant, but that "no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before" (James 149). Let us use the analogy of the number line. If we allow the string of numbers one, two, three, etc. to represent the individual thoughts that enter our mind over the course of time then we might say that each number may represent a completely different thought. James goes even farther than this, however, and here is the important point: he argues that not only would the experience of the thought designated number three be different from the experience of thought number two, but the experience of the number three would be different from another experience of the same number three that might occur at a later point in time, or as James says more simply than I: "there is no proof that the same bodily sensation is ever got by us twice" (150).

What it appears Stein is doing when she writes two or three chapters with the same title is arguing that the same element can be perceived differently. James writes, “Every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact. When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context” (151). Stein’s program proves to be even more ambitious than what James attempted because in playing with numbers as she does she denies the permanence of a priori thoughts, which mathematics is assumed to be, as well as a posteriori thoughts of sense experience.

Stein’s irreverent use of numbers in A Novel of Thank You signifies the anti-Realist, non-linear perception of reality which Stein adopted from William James and which was also expressed in the Cubists’ art. These intellectual ideas are the basis for the continuous present in her early writing and the distinction between identity and entity in her later writing. In A Novel of Thank You, Stein shows us that this perception of reality is an integral part of her writing by distorting and disrupting the most obvious and apparently unshakable of linear systems—arithmetic—by integrating these linear disruptions into not only the text, but the very form and structure of the novel (as in the Chapter titles).

Stein attempts to redefine number systems throughout her book, and this serves to set logic and rational thought on its head. Logical contradictions are

common in A Novel of Thank You. At the beginning of one chapter, Stein declares, “A scene introduced into a novel not a scene introduced into a novel”(39). Which is it? Perhaps in this book which is at once a novel and not a novel in its adherence to conventions, the answer is *both*. There are other examples scattered throughout the text such as “Twice at once” (17) and “If there are five then there are six by this they mean that a city is silly” (30).

Armed with the knowledge of the fallibility of linear and causal systems of thought, Stein alludes to, and often attacks, those same systems. Twice in the book, she quotes one of the axioms of modern physics, “Action and reaction are equal and opposite” (32 and 197), and on another occasion she rewrites it, “Action and in action and it will be successful they say” (93). Stein questions whether any sort of exactness is possible from numbers: “Supposing one considers four out of five or to be more correct three out of five or perhaps with greater exactness as to it supposing four possible out of six impossible and that again always is incorrect four possible out of seven and impossible . . .” (111). Are numbers even worth studying? She writes, “Two and two. Thirty and two. Thirty and thirty-two. Forgetting numbers. Who is forgetting numbers and not who is not forgetting numbers and not and not and who is forgetting numbers and who is not forgetting and forgetting numbers and not forgetting numbers” (71-2). She acknowledges that numbers have no material existence, that they are perceived only by the mind: “Imagining two or three times” (144); “Supposing seven thousand supposing fifteen thousand supposing four thousand . . .” (11); and “Imagine a thousand./

Imagine three thousand./ Imagine two thousand./ Imagine forty./ Imagine more in between./ Imagine at once” (61-2).

Allusions to the passage of time are to be found throughout this novel. In the opening pages, the minor motif “at once” is repeated in abundance, invoking the continuous present. As we read further we find statements like, “A continued story is a surprise” (13); “It is easy to believe when one hears one saying and say it wait a minute because if you start now you will have to start again it is easy to believe this every minute” (35); “Sunday makes Monday and Monday Sunday” (43); “He knew all about October. The beginning of October and the ending of October. When is October. October is the tenth month in any year” (44); “He was older at twenty-seven and then that has been said. She was older at eighteen she was older at twenty-six she was older at twenty-nine she was older at forty-three and this is all that has been said” (150); and “Can it be finally this and noon by this and if it is not which is theirs and he and all. Can it be continued to be now” (232). The apparent progression of days after days and years after years is not just a source of concern for Stein early in her career. In Mrs. Reynolds, the title character thinks obsessively about the age of Angel Harper when she discovers a prophesy by St. Odile which outlines Angel Harper’s rise to power and eventual defeat from the nations allied against him according to his age (MR 161-2).

Stein wonders just how objective things like numbers really are. When it comes to the numbers themselves, they are different: “There is a difference between fifteen hundred and three thousand. Who knows that./ Next./ There is a

difference between twenty-nine and thirty. Who knows that” (70) and “When they had been nearly as if when two and they had never said not at all could they know the difference between fifty and fifty and a hundred” (125). Stein suggests that the difference between numbers can be perceived subjectively, and she offers an excellent example. Stein asks, “who knows any difference between the fourth of February and the third of February” (154). For most people, there probably is not a difference between the third and fourth of February—they are just two more days out of the year. But February third is Stein’s birthday, so for her at least there is a very real difference between the number three and the number four.

Words in English narratives proceed in a more or less linear fashion just as numbers follow one after another. People are used to experiencing events in a linear way, used to seeing cause and effect relationships. But as William James believed, strict causality does not always occur, and the linear experience of reality may be an illusion indoctrinated into our psyches by our culture. Stein writes of the transience of such linear systems, “To change forward and back from time to time. They need to reassure themselves so that this as that is after that. In their motion motion and made it” (96). As one can see here, time is another concept taken to be linear but which Stein agrees with James is really not. Stein goes on:

Forward and back.

Back to back.

Back to back. Who knows. Plenty of time. Who knows. Had the same name. Who knows. When as in the meantime. Where is where is

where is where is where where it went when when and when is always  
always is in a while by that by that returns to and in conclusion” (97).

Because numbers are abstract concepts with no specific referent in the real world, we depend on the names of numbers in order to communicate the values with which they are assigned. Without these signifiers, there are no signs. Stein shows us how tentative those signifiers are: “Supposing that there had been no difference between the first and the eleventh, supposing also that there had been no difference between the eleventh and seventh and supposing also that there had been no difference between the seventh and second and supposing there had been no difference between the second and fifteen and five” (127). Change the name of a number to something else, and you have altered its identity. In A Novel of Thank You, Stein shows just how provisional names and identity can be.

Finally, on page 43 we find still one more logical contradiction. Stein writes, “Everybody is named Etienne./ Everybody is named Charles./ Everybody is named Alice” (43). Even if it were true that everybody could be identified by a single name, how could it be that everybody is named Etienne in one instant, and then Charles, and then Alice. Actually, such transformation of names is possible and is actually quite common as we shall see.

## 2.

*It is not by their name that they are called*—A Novel of Names

“Could there be lists of persons seen. If the lists are made could they be as

much as much as as much as ever. They delighted in it admirably” (85). In his introduction to the 1958 edition of A Novel of Thank You, Carl Van Vechten provides, with Alice Toklas’ assistance, a partial list of the real people whose names appear in the novel. Maureen Liston tries to supplement that list with reasonable suppositions as to the individuals behind the many of the other names which one encounters. “Miss Todd” from page 13 and “Elmer Harden” from pages 130 and 230 were real people who are also mentioned in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (Liston 70). “Y.D.” from page 69, Liston speculates, may be Jo Davidson’s wife Yvonne, and

One could continue in this fashion for pages: Ernest Walsh [140], Charlotte Perkins [140], Mr. Henry Lamb [178], Victor Hugo [188], Miss Beach [209], Emmet Addis [212], Mr. Milton [224], Mr. Taylor [224], Mr. Bradley [224], Mrs. Brooks and Avery Hopwood [232] can all be identified by much more than the words “actual name.” A number of the first names can be guessed at: on p. 9, for instance, Edith could very well be Edith Sitwell; Ida Ida Rubinstein; Etta [181] Etta Cone; Napoleon [168] Picasso; Pauline [208] Aunt Pauline, Stein’s first car, and therefore Goldiva [77] must be Godiva, the second car; Celestine (220) Toklas’ first servant. Fernande [208] is certainly Fernande Olivier (70-1).

But Stein is not simply dropping names or cataloging the people she might have met on a daily basis as in a diary. In a more conventional novel, proper names signify the characters in the story. Here, the use of the real names of real

people lays bare Stein's own process of character creation. Early in the novel, in the first "Chapter LIII," Stein declares "Mrs. George Allen and I will not use her name" (24). On the very next page, however, she does, although perhaps not deliberately:

... no curiosity no curiosity about Mrs. George Allen because she makes Maria as angry as that Maria as angry as that oh yes.

And as I have said yes as I have said.

Forgetting a name.

Yes as I have said and as I have said.

Forgetting a name.

One two three all out but she.

Forgetting a name (25).

Here, Stein includes the name of a person in her text and simultaneously expresses an explicit desire not to use the name. Stein describes how replacing a real name with a fictitious name causes readers to suspend their knowledge of the deception even though they may well recognize that a deception is occurring: "Can one be deceived in Hope. Yes. Can one be deceived by Hope. No. Can one be deceived when one has refused to recognize her again. Yes. Will one be deceived after one has refused to recognize her again. No" (29).

In much of her fiction, Stein draws upon real people to serve as inspiration for her characters' creation. The first and most commented-upon example of this is found in her posthumously-published first novel Q.E.D. The love triangle that



is described between the three characters Adele, Helen, and Mabel is based upon Stein's early affair with her Johns Hopkins classmate May Bookstaver. This affair, which was an emotionally painful experience for Stein, was the source of inspiration for the characters and events "in both Q.E.D. and 'Melanctha.' In The Making of Americans, the concept was reborn in new and more elaborate guises" (Katz xii). Leon Katz shows how Stein recycles the basic story of this affair in her early work, though she changes the names of the central characters, and even their gender. Regarding the 'Melanctha' episode in Three Lives, Katz argues that it "is in fact the story of Q.E.D. in disguise, with May Bookstaver as Melanctha and Stein as the tormented doctor [Jeff Campbell]" (xxx).

In one of the "storylines" which Stein briefly develops through the course of A Novel of Thank You, Stein shows us how she can appropriate real people into fictional activities and environments. In one example she imagines Janet Scudder, an American sculptor and one of her friends during the 1920s in a hypothetical situation (Mellow 307):

Supposing Janet Scudder asks Paul Chalfin how he likes Russia.

Supposing he answers. Supposing she continues to repeat have I had it and he says yes have I had it does this make that difference or differently. If she engages to do nothing at all and afterwards remembers how it was understood would she be perfectly and perfectly meaning in and because of it and would she be this time have had it as it was to be when they had heard. In this way. She can say (NOTY 90).

I certainly would not presume to psychoanalyze Stein's initial reasons for writing, but using real people as the patterns for characters in one's stories gives a writer a kind of control over the painful events of one's life. A writer, through a story, might choose to repeat or relive certain events from one's past and within the confines of fiction can make them do and say whatever she wants.

Although A Novel of Thank You is no different from Stein's other prose work in that she draws upon real people whom she knew and transforms them into characters in her book, what is exceptional is that Stein does not give them new names. This of course, serves Stein's metafictional program by alerting us to the extent of the process of name transformation by leaving names intact. The act of an author naming her characters invokes that original giver of names—Adam—and stresses the importance of his act of naming. Whoever gives names to objects and ideas also creates the system in which ideas are expressed. In this case, Stein would be the one “who names who names and names and names and named. Starting from the left and naming them and starting from the right and naming them and starting from the right and naming them and starting from the left and names and named them” (47). Stein deprives words of their meanings and uses words to refer to things that they might not refer to ordinarily, and “In this way they are named. Allow me allow me to participate” (35). In her own writing, Stein becomes a Modern Adam, a new giver of names.

Renaming her characters to conceal the identities of her friends and acquaintances also protects Stein from incurring the anger of people who might

not want to be written about and it protects them from embarrassment. In A Novel of Thank You, we also find Stein actively concealing identities: “Ernest Ernest Ernest Walsh and that surprised her because she had expected me to say Olga Walter” (140) and “When Harry and Frank and Paul and James and John and Robert and Ernest and Edward and this and that and because this and for that and nobody knows their name all the same all the same to be sure that they have left it all here and by this care who shall be as much mistaken for them” (107). Of course, Stein’s literary portraits usually revealed the names of her subjects, but often her portraits are either flattering or perhaps so obscure that no one knows what Stein is writing about.

Stein might have been influenced by William James, not only in her ideas of causality and continuity as we saw with respect to numbers, but in naming as well. In that same chapter on the stream of thought, James comments on words and cautions us that “we must never forget that we are talking symbolically, and that there is nothing in nature to answer to our words” (153). Words, or names, are not bound to an immutable correspondence with those things to which they refer. “But if language must thus influence us,” James goes on, “the agglutinative languages, and even Greek and Latin with their declensions, would be better guides. Names did not appear in them inalterable, but changed their shape to suit the context in which they lay” (153). Such is the case with Stein’s appropriation of the names of real people into her writings. When Stein adopts the name of a real person into her writing, such as in the portrait “Guillaume Apollinaire,” what

is being expressed is not the objective reality of Apollinaire (if any such reality ever existed) but Apollinaire as perceived through Stein's own subjective affectations. And when Stein gives her subject a new name, such as "Ada" for Alice, then the new character is even further removed from its source. This idea of transformation does not seem to extend far beyond names and nouns. One can contrast what has been said above with a long paragraph found in "Chapter CXXIII." Here we find Stein affirming that essences of words and phrases remain unchanged in different contexts when they do not serve as names and nouns:

"There is no difference between at that time and at that time there is no difference between how do you do and how do you do there is no difference between singling them out and singling them out there is no difference between charming and charming there is no difference between relating to it and relating to it . . . "

(117).

As a writer, Stein found herself caught in the same dilemma that most of her Modernist contemporaries were caught in: how does one tell an original story when one is burdened with centuries—even millennia—of other stories? For Stein, the problem was even more fundamental. How can one use words to conjure images in prose and poetry when so many words have been used so often that they have lost all meaning? As Stein told an audience in 1935:

Can't you see that when language was new—as it was with Chaucer and Homer—the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there? He could say "O moon," "O sea," "O love" and the moon and the

sea and love were really there. And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just worn out literary words? The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them; they were just rather stale literary words . . . and we know that you have to put some strangeness, something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun . . . . Now you all have seen hundreds of poems about roses and you know in your bones that a rose is not there . . . I know that in daily life we don't go around saying ["A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"]. Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years. (Wilder 26)

"Chapter LVI," on page 26, begins with a meditation on selections and choices: "Who would prefer one to the other. She would prefer one to the other. Which would she prefer. She would prefer the one she had chosen, and which one did she prefer she did prefer one." And at the end of the first paragraph, "This may make a difference to those who change not their last names but their first names, their first or Christian names not their last or surnames." In the second paragraph there is a description of a wedding ceremony, an event which, more often than not, is an occasion in which names are changed, as the new wife takes the surname of her husband:

The first day at her house and not more than fifty present the second day at another house and a large number present and the third day at her house and

a large number present. And what it was it was a wedding and she married him after having been more or less in love with someone else. The man with whom she was more or less in love was one who would always be what he was as he was and the one whom she married had a father and mother who would naturally prefer to rest (26).

And then Stein the storyteller wonders how this group of characters might be perceived, "Could they be easily representative and a failure. Not she. Not first." The reader, having discovered this brief tale of a woman thrust into a marriage she does not want, is likely to sympathize with the woman, but at the end of this chapter, Stein adds an interesting twist: "It is a great pleasure to be absolutely certain that everything that she hears has a name and that she knows the name. It is a great comfort to those who are fond of memory. /As fond of memory." When we read this in light of Stein's later rejection of memory in favor of a direct experience of essence, as described in The Geographical History of America, the woman appears somewhat less sympathetic. Throughout this book, Stein "dislocates unitary notions of identity" not only in giving people new names, but in assigning names to groups of people (Berry 79).

Proper names, like all signs, are completely arbitrary. Anyone can be given any collection of sounds or symbols for a name, and that name, if it is a word already assigned other denotations, may not necessarily retain those denotations as an accurate description of the person or personality of its bearer. In Mrs. Reynolds, the war-mongering dictator is named Angel Harper, a name with

obvious positive connotations that certainly do not describe the personality of the character. In The World Is Round, the little girl Rose also wonders about this connection between personality and names with respect to her own name: “Rose was her name and would she have been Rose if her name had not been Rose. She used to think and then she used to think again./ Would she have been Rose if her name had not been Rose and would she have been Rose if she had been a twin” (WII 537). In this way, Stein follows Saussure’s idea of the arbitrariness of signs, but Stein demonstrates an exception to the Saussurian model by implying that any individual person might be able to choose and assign new signifiers (names) to signifieds (in this case, people): “Everybody can change a name they can change the name Helen to Harry they can change the name Edith to Edward they can change the name Ivy to Adela . . . Ivy can be shortened it is rapidly followed by five bells” (NOTY 38). A newly created character, like a new-born baby, is a signified without a signifier.

Also, at times in this text, Stein seems to use names as categories in which she can classify people in a way not unlike her classification system in The Making of Americans, although certainly not as well developed. She writes in the second “Chapter LI”: “Parts and apart and start are all used to use and use it. Not as for their pleasure and profit and so to make it seem the same as one. Theresa or Tessie, Josephine or Jenny, Louise or Louisa to make them all the same as one. Charles or Charlie to make them all the same as one” (65). Stein gives in to her earlier desire to classify large groups of people according to limited

categorizations. Of the quotation immediately above, Ellen Berry writes, “All characters become Alice; the thousands become one plus the one who names. At the same time, no “one” can be singled out and named since everybody is everybody else, a process that foregrounds the naming of names and conceals identities at the same time (79).

We might also remember Stein’s capricious use of pronouns that sometimes conflict with their referents, as when Stein uses masculine-gender personal pronouns (he, him) to refer to herself, or as when the pronouns have no clear referent. When we read “She said just as easy and he said generally. He said easily and she said finally. She said as much. And he said he said as much” the pronouns are signifiers which are not only connotatively empty, but are perhaps denotatively empty too (NOTY 4). Denotatively, “he” should refer to a male and “she” to a female, but Stein does not always use them in that way. Ultimately, most of the personal pronouns in A Novel of Thank You are nothing more than black print on white paper.

Although Stein’s process of naming is not bound by gender restrictions, she does limit the field of names for which she would exchange one name for another. She likes to choose names which either look or sound similar to the name which she is replacing or which describe some element of the individual’s personality. Again, Ada for Alice is a good example, and in A Novel of Thank You she shows how she produces others: “Rose rhymes with cosy and posy rhymes with rosy and rosy rhymes with rosy and posy rhymes with posy with cosy with posy and with



an effort” (20-1); “A sound separates soon./ Distanced too, Julian Julius Julia, Julian Julia Julius, Julius Julian Julia, Julius Julia Julian” (21); and “To choose them and to have to be obliged to remember that Zenobie is Mary and Jenny is Louise and Helen Cavour is Helen Strong. Always Helen always strong and if she were as often right as wrong” (58).

The long passage on page 26 from which I quoted earlier mentions a very commonplace instance of changes in names and identity: weddings. From time to time, Stein links the two topics, weddings and names, together: “All of it is kind, kind to be, kind Miss Agnes had better have had two children after she married and became Mrs. Christopher Harriet” (11) and “A question did he marry a woman, or how had he had it when he saw the very great difference there is between names as long as that” (57). Maureen Liston cites this weddings-names connection as an example of a “change” motif (82). Although a less arbitrary change, a woman taking the surname of her husband does demonstrate how a signified can change signifiers. But while Stein’s numerous mentions of weddings in A Novel of Thank You does illustrate this important idea of names and nouns as signifiers, the weddings are more strongly linked to the third important motive-theme, arrangements.

### 3.

Who did make flowers into bouquets—A Novel of Arrangements

Early in A Novel of Thank You—about the first 60 pages—one finds many

references to weddings and romances and families. I think it is possible that early in the novel's composition Stein might have intended the "plot," such as it is, to revolve around a wedding or several weddings just as much of The Making of Americans revolves around the marriage of Alfred Hersland to Julia Dehning.

These references are naturally linked to discussions of names, but we find them linked to another important motif as well. In "Chapter CXCIX" Stein writes of "A wedding in arrangement" (167) and elsewhere in the text the weddings are often associated with arrangements: "Charles married, taller not older, wealthier not wilder, stronger not quicker, and as if arranged" (44); "To let and to let them and to imagine to let them and to manage to arrange to manage to exchange and to let them. Should cousins marry" (47); ". . . and furthermore there was no reason for it someone who was of an entirely different arrangement. This one was one who was to be named and as she was married and as she then inherited her fortune . . ." (57); and "Once upon a time there was a wedding and they made coins and coins were in their place and places were better arranged than they had been" (194).

Linking weddings with "arrangements" perhaps connotes the practice of arranged marriages, and if so, then here we see another metafictional point being made.

While in the real world of the twentieth century arranged marriages are uncommon in Western culture, in novels and stories, all marriages between fictitious characters are, technically, arranged. It is at the whim, and by the will, of the author that one character marries another. Or, as Stein writes, "Wedding./ I thought of it" (62).

Besides the various numbers and names which one can find on every page of the novel, there are certain words which Stein often repeats. One of these is “arrange” and its many alternate forms, such as “arranging,” “arrangements,” “arranged,” “re-arrange,” “pre-arrange,” and so on. Stein’s use of the word “arrange” and its various forms in A Novel of Thank You demonstrates the power of words to mean more than one thing. Stein employs several of the word’s denotations and connotations in the text. To be certain that I was at least aware of all of the denotations that the word carries, I consulted the OED. Here I found a couple of definitions which had not occurred to me, though perhaps they had occurred to Stein. The first definition for “arrange” that the OED cites has to do with the military, “To draw up in ranks or in line of battle.” Naturally, this led me to the passage from “Composition As Explanation” which Stein has inserted in her text. Here we find Stein citing Lord Grey’s remark about World War I. Stein then draws an analogy between war and writing, and although she does not use the word “arrange” in this passage, she does use its synonym “prepare”:

That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared. Writing and painting and all that is like that for those who occupy themselves with it and don’t make it as it is made (132).

Elsewhere, Stein links the words “prepare” and “preparation” with writing a story: “The story of a preparation for and because of a disturbance” (9) and “preparing a

novel, preparing it as it is best as is the best as is the best or most prepared way” (22).

One human activity besides writing for which preparations need to be made is travel. Travel, whether over long distances or short, is an idea that appears from time to time in A Novel of Thank You. In the second half of the novel, Stein occasionally associates the “arrangement” motif with the activity of travel: “It is easy to arrange that they should go away” (131); “These who were known as they knew it said one day when as they had met often they were arranging to leave together why then they could not have been heard from should they be reasonable” (160); and “A wedding in arrangement and by their having been almost always let alone. A departure for their going away” (167). A trip, like a wedding or writing a novel, is an action which must be prepared for and is not likely to be very successful if it is done spontaneously.

Another definition for “arrange” which we find in the OED is “To adapt (a composition) for instruments or voices for which it was not originally written.” Stein employs this use of the word in her 1928 opera Four Saints in Three Acts, as in “Left when there was precious little to be asked by the ones who were overwhelmingly particular about what they were adding to themselves by means of their arrangements which might be why they went away and came again” (SW 606). Late in A Novel of Thank You we find Stein arranging voices: “Once it happened that they were very well about it and could be easily prepared to rearrange their voices” (221). Earlier in the novel, Stein takes a more metafictional

approach to the arrangement of voices:

Conversations as arranged.

Will you think about it. Yes I will think about it. Do you think about it. I do think about it. And in thinking about it. Yes and in thinking about it. It is very easy to be molested.

Conversations as prearranged. In adding to it whom do you please. I please just as I please, just as I please I please. I did not wish as long an answer I wished only to know what was added to it. I have replied that it was added to it. No causes it at all (10).

A third definition from the OED has to do with relations among people:

“To come to, or make, a settlement with other persons as to a matter to be done so that all concerned in it shall do their part.” I have already discussed the weddings in A Novel of Thank You with respect to the “arrangement” motif, but Stein mentions other familial relations. In a family, people are arranged according to their relationships with the other members, and with particular relationships come particular duties: “More than that it was soon discovered that from being respected as rich and useful the mother of a very well cared for child and the wife and protection of an interested and admired husband should surely arrange everything and she did” (53); “After that it happened that a year and a half having used she and as they were prepared to go they were prepared to continue as if she were her mother her father and herself and any other . . .” (57); and “It is easy to be a nice brother sister mother father aunt and uncle and altogether will they

answer will they prefer to follow will they prefer to arrange . . .” (76).

However, the most relevant definition of “to arrange” has to be “To put (the parts of a thing) into proper or requisite order; to adjust.” A likely criticism against works such as A Novel of Thank You is that there does not seem to be any organization or structure to the work. Stein seems to be writing words at random; sometimes the combinations of words make sense, and sometimes they do not. “It is easily understood that they had arranged everything,” Stein writes, and we find that this novel, as I hope I have already demonstrated to some degree, may be easily approached as a work which was created through a conscious endeavor (141). Although Stein’s “writing may convey an impression of having been composed on an ad hoc basis, with not only ideas but even the manner in which they are expressed having been chosen on a principle of extreme free association, yet it is actually very ‘carefully arranged’” (Meyer xxii). In the very beginning of Tender Buttons, we find Stein using the word “arrangement” to make this same point:

#### A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

With regards to reading A Novel of Thank You as simply a random juxtaposition of various words, Stein asks “Does he do it because he is placed beside it or does he do it because it is arranged so well” (NOTY 44). In several instances, Stein

links the “arrangement” motif with words denoting a conscious decision-making process: “This is and is not an arrangement easily intended when they have very many decisions to make” (65); “. . . will they answer will they prefer to follow will they prefer to arrange will they choose and will the choice and will the rest of the middle of the half and the arrangement be as much as there has been of increase” (76); “How do they arrange what they like when they are undisturbed . . . . They can select. They can select them. They can select and remind themselves . . .” (104); “They might have measured to length and breadth in order to arrange everything” (169); “They might be and having not had and been arranged that it was arranged (189); “And now how no not to be there this time as she was nearly by their arrangement carefully prepared” (191).

The songlike passage found early in the book, “Preparing a novel./ Preparing a novel and preparing away./ Preparing a novel prepared to stay./ Preparing a novel./ She is preparing a novel.” (22) announces this idea of preparation in writing as one of the themes to be explored in this book. Like any novel, A Novel of Thank You is a work to which the author devotes careful thought and consideration. The only difference is that here Stein lets us in on some of the compositional processes. Arranging elements in a novel is not unlike arranging voices in a choir or instruments in an orchestra or the elements in a painter’s still-life: “Arrangements of pears and not apples of oranges and not pears of pears and not fruit. Who considers fruit from the point of view of obstacles and this is religious” (8). If it were really true that Stein simply recorded

every string of words that entered into her mind while she was writing, then this book which took over a year to write would be many times longer than it is now. Obviously, though, she used some sort of filtering process. In Part Three, we find Stein insisting that there are limitations to her novel: "Never needing to be adding a novel never needing to be adding to a novel never needing to be adding to a novel at least never needing to be adding to a novel at least never needing to be adding to a novel. Never needing to be adding to a novel" (239). Clearly, part of the conscious decision-making process involved deciding what should be included in this book: "... they can say was it arranged and as it was arranged they have added something or shall it be that they have added nothing shall it be that they have added nothing or shall it be that they have added something" (128); and

leaving it out. Leaving it and to last and leaving it out. No doubt.

Frequently they have attachments and they frequently select as much as they had to have when they sent it in this way and they sent it in this way. Practically inviting them to stay in that way in a way whose pleasure is it was it or could it have commenced to arrange when there were different additions in their final hesitation. No use changing it at this time (40).

Writing a novel involves not only decisions about what to include in it, but how those elements should be structured. In a short, unnumbered chapter late in the novel, Stein writes,

They had not stayed very likely because at this time they were able to carry out the intention which they had had when circumstances seemed to be



possibly going to make it seem more possible to do something else than that which they were in every likelihood going to be doing. This makes it very much more satisfactory to those endeavoring to decide not only upon the exact situation but also upon everything in any way connected with it. Everyone anticipating that they had been very much disturbed could then be comforted" (226).

In an earlier chapter, Stein recognizes too that a story should be understood by its readers:

Supposing she knew that a war would popularise differences and she did know that a war would popularise pretty well pretty nearly pretty much as much as mills. No one knows what millers do.

Do they.

Do they know what they will save.

Do they.

Do they know how do they know what they have arranged for.

Please ask them to arrange mills so that mills will be at once understood.

Please ask them to arrange folds so that folding is at once understood. Please ask them have it at once understood (130).

Novels are usually arranged so that the reader can easily understand what the author is trying to say. Stein's novels, although composed with careful deliberation, certainly do not establish a friendly rapport with the readers'

expectations. But this does not mean that Stein is unconcerned about her readers. On the contrary, they are constantly on her mind, as our examination of the fourth motif will show.

#### 4.

##### *Let me thank every one every day*—A Novel of Thank You

If one reads A Novel of Thank You straight through, that is, from the first page to the last rather than skipping around, one finds the last 70 pages (starting at approximately page 170) are dominated by the phrase “thank you.” Often, this phrase is found in some form in the final sentence of chapters, such as “And now and then thank you” (195), “And I thank you” (177), and “Thank you very much for having introduced me to your mother” (220). In one unnumbered chapter, the sentence “Thank you very much” is the only text to be found (203).

The phrase “thank you” or “I thank you” is not simply an indication that “it is now an occasion for an expression of gratitude” (213). The phrase represents a moment of personal connection between “I”—the individual performing the act of thanking, and “you”—the individual or individuals receiving thanks. The excessive thanking found in the final stage of A Novel of Thank You highlights this personal connection between one person and another. It may be that the person with whom Stein is demonstrating her personal connection, and is therefore thanking, is Alice Toklas, but such a notion would support the argument that A Novel of Thank You is a private document meant to be read by Stein and Toklas

only, a position with which I disagree and have argued against earlier in this thesis. Toklas may be one whom Stein wishes to thank, but if that is so, I believe she is one of many. It is not uncommon in metafiction for the author to refer to herself within the text of the story—to reveal her presence as author—and I believe that through the “thank you” motif, Stein is revealing herself to her readers.

One does not need to look very far in Stein’s oeuvre to find examples of Stein winking at us from behind her sometimes opaque curtain of words. The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is perhaps the most obvious example of Stein hiding herself within the text. The narrator claims to be Toklas, and Stein goes to considerable lengths to imitate the mannerisms of Toklas’ speech. However, we find as we read that very little of the book has to do exclusively with Toklas; most of it concerns Gertrude Stein, her experiences, and her work. At the end of the book we discover (as if there were ever any doubt) who the real author of the book is: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it” (SW 237). In the beginning of her opera The Mother of Us All, we meet a character known only as “G.S.” who tells us, “My father’s name was Daniel he had a black beard he was not tall not at all tall, he had a black beard his name was Daniel” (WII 782). So too was Gertrude Stein’s father. We can also point to Adele in Q.E.D., Jeff

Campbell in Three Lives, and Martha Hersland in The Making of Americans as early examples of Stein's persona participating in her novels. And in Brewsie and Willie, Stein interjects herself into her characters' conversation: "Do you know, said Pauline with great solemnity, you know that Stein woman who says things. Yeah, we all know, said Willie" (742). Stein has already revealed herself to some degree in A Novel of Thank You by letting us see some of the techniques she employs during her writing process. One of her lines, "Nice and quiet I thank you" might serve as an appropriate illustration of exactly what Stein is doing: reaching out politely ("nice") through the wall of written text ("quiet") to personally connect with the reader (151).

Stein's expressions of gratitude in this book, though polite, are not always of the humble sort. Her certainty of her pre-eminence among the Modernist writers is famous, and her ego was as large as The Making of Americans is long. She preferred to surround herself with people who would pay her work the compliments she thought it deserved. "It was in this way that they were flattered a history of flattery not naturally as history of a flattery a history of flattery are examples of flattery these are examples of flattery and being adequate to expecting to be told everything" (159). In some instances, Stein refers to people paying compliments: "When they came to bow they came to be here. And when they came to be here they were received and remained as long as that" (105); "... she took him to be very much the object of attention that he was" (153); and "Can you be so very much admired by them" (195). Stein seeks admiration and recognition

for her writing, not just among the community of Parisian artists and writers which formed her circle, but also in her homeland: "A visit to America. In visiting America they found themselves there and they said who is perhaps the most important and they answered you are perhaps the most important" (116). She wonders, "Now and then popular when when will I be as popular as you see me" (193). At other times she acknowledges what little respect she had received: "There is no reason to doubt the exactness of Mr. James White's statements concerning me. They are correct and appreciative./ One can but thanks to you thank you" (185) and "He made triumph triumph be welcome welcome be as well be as we be as never to be used to it nearly as say so and they quoted me" (209). And in one memorable passage, she expresses her desire for literary fame: "Supposing everybody thinks of Victor Hugo./ One two three./ Supposing everyone thinks of me./ One two three" (189).

It may not be a coincidence that the "thank you" motif comes not only at the end of the novel, but also is expressed towards the end of the chapters. Stein had to have known, though she would never have admitted it publicly, that The Making of Americans, which had just been published, would be an extraordinarily difficult novel for any reader because of its great length and the distractions of the book's minimal plot, lengthy digressions, and repetitive passages. A Novel of Thank You is just as difficult to read, in its own way, and Stein's thanking in these final pages could be a kind of reward Stein offers her reader. Only a dedicated admirer of her writing would willingly endure the 925 pages of The Making of

Americans or the extreme “hermeticism” of A Novel of Thank You. Early in this thesis, I referred to Liston’s interpretation of a short chapter on page 218. Liston called the second sentence a “magical and emotional surprise” after the monotonous repetition in the long first sentence. But might Stein be offering her thanks to the reader for enduring this test of patience when at the end of the long sentence she writes, “. . . they did leave it to them did they and not to like it very much very much and thanking thanking very much and they very much as they were as they did very much and they very much as they were as they did and very well I thank you” (218)? Read in this way, the “thank you” motif becomes a not-so-hidden message for her readers to discover.

Another approach to the “thank you” motif involves linking it to two other “th-” words which appear with some frequency in the final phase of the novel. At one point, Stein asserts, “A novel of thank you makes it be theirs too” (217). She repeatedly makes the point that this book is “theirs.” Of course, in keeping with her obscure use of pronouns, Stein never tells us exactly to whom the “they” in “theirs” refers, but for a few chapters, Stein links the words “theirs” and “thank” together. In “Chapter CCLVIII” we read, “They thanked him for theirs;/ The next time to consider it and let it be in the place of arrangement and theirs by as well as if they could could relieved by well and having” (214). On the next page, in a second “Chapter CCL,” Stein opens with “It is their hope./ Thank you./ They make it theirs./ They feel that they know. They can be rested. They enjoy this. They do like to do it” (215). “Making it theirs” also reminds us of the often-

quoted passage from the beginning of the “Martha Hersland” chapter of The Making of Americans: “I am writing for myself and strangers. This is the only way that I can do it. Everybody is a real one to me, everybody is like some one else too to me. No one of them that I know can want to know it and so I write for myself and strangers” (289). What better way is there for an author to connect to her present and possibly future readers than to insist that her work belongs to them as much to her? Stein recognizes that she need not be so charitable, that the decision to make this book “theirs” (or ours) is another conscious decision, part of her overall arrangement of the book: “Re-arrange this makes it that it is found to be allowed fortunately theirs originally intended and but is it when they thank you” (221); and “. . . it is all a pleasure if I thank them very much and so having meant to be naturally please be there now will make invitations come once in a while every time when they are theirs by choice if indeed not as it is left alone to change it so often that it makes it be very well understood as to their advantage and at noon” (219).

The other word which appears with some frequency near the “thank you” motif is “think.” We have already observed Stein’s use of the word when she hopes that those who think of Victor Hugo will also think of her. Steven Meyer also notes a connection between thinking and thanking in the text. He shows how these two words are related both etymologically and aurally:

The relation between “thinking” and “giving thanks” also concerns philosopher Martin Heidegger in his study What Is Called Thinking?;

perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Heidegger's examination of these terms corresponds more closely to Emerson's understanding of language as "fossil poetry" than does Stein's . . . . Heidegger analyzes the etymological connection between "[t]he Old English *thencan*, to think, and *thancian*, to thank," thereby returning the "poetic origin" of the words to them.

Unlike Emerson or Heidegger, Stein demonstrates little interest in words' history, in their possible diachronic echoes emphasizing instead their synchronic arrangements. Whereas Heidegger insists on the etymological connections between "think" and "thank," Stein concentrates on the significance the words possess in relation to each other when they are placed in close proximity; in a sentence, on a page. The connections that she then posits are not false etymologies because they are not etymologies at all (Meyer xxiii).

"Think" and "thank" are also related in terms of Stein's metafictional program. If Stein saw this novel as an opportunity to reveal her creative processes, including, as I have suggested in this section, her own desire for a place among the literary elite of her age, for her readers to experience, then "thinking" might describe the means by which her readers can experience her personally, that is by perceiving her essence by means of one's mind. A couple of passages would appear to support this hypothesis. In "Chapter CLXXX," we find Stein anticipating her writings will be widely read at some future date:

Think again again and again and in and again and again and in this



again and again.

Think in this.

Again and again.

Might it be for long.

And might it be that this is this as long as this is this for long.

As they might be easily wanting to be known now (151-2).

Somewhat later, in a series of passages between pages 219 and 235 which Meyer identifies as ripe with thinking and thanking, Stein expresses her wish to be remembered through her writing: "She put it away perhaps it is gone if it is gone if it is gone if he should come would I be at all likely to remember what I intended had intended to put in and if I do not what do I do. If he thinks to thank me. I have known that I have to have written written to have left left it in the way that I have not only not ever done before but also remember to remind it of me" (225). And finally, "To thank you to think of it as it is to be thank you and I thank you" (234).

Very early in the book, Stein writes, "To really make a story true this must be you" (16). Elsewhere, she equates A Novel of Thank You and perhaps all of her writing with her own physical existence. So by reading her works, anyone can develop a personal connection with the author. She plays on the phrase "When this you see remember me" as a way to underscore this (139). We find in the text, "When this you see you added me" (11); "This I see remember me" (189); and

“they have this and they see me” (194), all of which ask us to think of Stein the person when we read her words.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

In her "Introduction" to a recent edition of Gertrude Stein's How To Write, Patricia Meyerowitz wrote that the most important lesson to be learned from Stein is that there need not be any "separation between thinking and feeling and the act of writing. It is all done at the same time" (ix). In other words, Stein did not differentiate between composition and analysis. Instead, with an idea or set of ideas in her mind, she would begin writing, reflecting upon and revising her subject as she wrote.

This is also what the metafictional writer does: she examines the processes of her literary creation concurrent with that same activity of creation. The question then becomes whether Stein was aware that she was creating metafiction when she wrote A Novel of Thank You. Stylistic elements aside, did she understand to what degree A Novel of Thank You differed as a novel from the established nineteenth-century conventions of genre, or even from her own contemporaneous work such as Lucy Church Amiably? I have suggested throughout this thesis that Stein was aware that she was writing a metafiction (although she obviously could not have used the term *metafiction*), but perhaps it is more correct to say that in 1925 she was consciously reflecting on her recently

published novel The Making of Americans and examining the changes that had occurred in her unique prose style since 1911 by the most efficient means of analysis available to a writer—by actually writing it.

Of course, A Novel of Thank You was not the first time, and it certainly would not be the last time, Gertrude Stein would engage in what we now refer to as metafictional writing. We find Stein's preoccupation with her own work presenting itself as an important feature again and again throughout her career, explicitly and implicitly, in everything from The Making of Americans and Tender Buttons to The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and The Geographical History of America. Even in what appears to be straightforward criticism of her own work and others' in "Composition As Explanation" and Lectures in America, Stein still writes in a unique style and transforms literary criticism into literary art just as so many other great authors have done in the past. Perhaps recognizing just how different her style of writing was from anything which had come before, even different from what her Modernist contemporaries were writing, Stein was struggling to understand, just as her readers struggle, what her words really mean and whether her innovations were worthwhile literary endeavors or just so much meaningless nonsense.

Many critics would cast their vote for the latter. Even fifty years after her death, most of her work still sits unread by all but a few and unexplored by critics while the writings of her fellow Modernists whom she both admired and despised—Joyce, Henry James, Hemingway—have all found audiences both in

public and critical circles. Perhaps her innovations are worthless, or perhaps she was so far ahead of her time that the critical approaches needed to fully understand and appreciate her work have yet to be invented. In this thesis, I have tried to combine two relatively untested approaches: a metafictional interpretation and an analogy to Cubist collage.

Comparisons between Stein's writing and Picasso's Cubism are as old as Stein criticism itself, but the point of comparison has almost always been with Analytic Cubism, which may be beneficial when thinking about Stein's early works, but becomes problematic when we want to apply such a comparison to Tender Buttons or A Novel of Thank You. It seems clear to me that Cubist collage offers an insight into Stein's work of the mid-1910s and 1920s, and yet only Randa Dubnick has performed anything resembling an in-depth analysis of the similarities.

These approaches to A Novel of Thank You are not the only critical approaches which may be applied to Stein's strange novel. Like any great writer, Stein leaves her work open to a myriad of possible interpretations. The purpose of this thesis has been to explore only one of these interpretations and to shed a little light on an almost-forgotten corner of a neglected, but still extraordinary, writer's vast field of work.

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## VITA

John Reep was born in Wichita, Kansas, on September 10, 1973, but he has lived most of his life in Texas. He graduated from the University of Texas at San Antonio in May, 1996 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. In the fall of that same year, he began graduate studies at Southwest Texas State University, and he will receive the Master of Arts degree in English in May, 1999. He plans to continue to pursue his interest in the writings of Gertrude Stein and the other Modernists at Temple University in the fall of 1999 when he begins course work in support of a Ph.D.

Permanent address: P.O. Box 782081  
San Antonio, Texas 78278