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Cultivating Childishness: *The Gertrude Stein First Reader*

and the Reparative Turn in Criticism

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ABSTRACT: *This article argues that The Gertrude Stein First Reader (1946), a text that plays with the form of the nineteenth-century literacy textbook and was originally pitched to an educational children's publisher, is more productively understood as disrupting the reading practices of adults than as a work of children's literature. The long-neglected First Reader articulates the value of a queer reading practice rooted in the ambiguous notion of childishness, a concept distinguished here from childlikeness. Stein's unorthodox pedagogy and her First Reader's celebration of such "childish" reading practices as error, unmastery, incompetence, and ignorance are put into dialogue with theory's recent rejection of suspicious, symptomatic and paranoid models of reading. This critical turn began with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation of a queer "reparative reading" and has developed into a broader attack on critique and the "hermeneutics of suspicion." The present article locates in Stein's work the connections between childishness, queerness, and reparative practices and identifies childishness as an important trope for thinking through contemporary styles in criticism and pedagogy, a trope which allows readers to keep in view the specifically queer origins of the reparative turn.*

In 1938, Margaret Wise Brown, who would become famous for her 1947 children's classic *Goodnight Moon*, invited Gertrude Stein to write for a series produced by the experimental educational publisher William R. Scott. Scott had recently been given office space at the Bank Street School in Greenwich Village (also known as the Bureau of Educational Experiments) by its visionary founder Lucy Sprague Mitchell.¹ Bank Street School, now the Bank Street College of Education, was a teacher-training facility that was established to conduct

its own developmental research and, in October 1937, opened the Writers Lab, whose central preoccupation was “how purely literary considerations and those brought to light by developmental research might be reconciled in the new kind of children’s literature.”² Brown’s own children’s books, whose Steinian inflections have been well noted, were produced in this experimental climate.³ Stein eagerly accepted Brown’s offer and produced a picture book, *The World is Round* (1939), which underwent—and passed—what Scott understood to be a methodical and “objective” testing process to determine its suitability for “young children of a specific age range.”⁴ *The World is Round*, illustrated by Clement Hurd with, at Stein’s request, a rose and blue colour scheme, was a modest success and even inspired a range of tie-in soft furnishings for nurseries.⁵ Stein went on to produce two more works for Scott—*To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1957) and *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* (published with *Three Plays* in 1946)—books that engaged (loosely) with the abecedarian form and the literary textbook, respectively. Both were swiftly rejected for their failure to cohere with the developmental assumptions underpinning Bank Street School and Scott’s publishing enterprise. The unsolicited *To Do* was rejected as a children’s book, and Scott’s partner, John McCullough, told Stein that tests in several schools confirmed that the *First Reader*, written at the publisher’s invitation, was “far too old for a first reader.”⁶ Both texts remained unpublished in Stein’s lifetime and have struggled to find audiences (either child or adult) ever since.

In what follows, I want to consider *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* less as a work for children than a celebration of childish reading (to be distinguished, as I shall argue, from childlike reading). When Stein’s *First Reader* appeared in print in the United States in 1948, the book’s dust jacket advertised it as “a juvenile for adults.”⁷ Following this cue, my aim is not to read the *First Reader* as a work of children’s literature or to situate it within the genre of

modernist children's writing more generally.⁸ The long-neglected *First Reader*, which, with its series of twenty lessons, echoes the form of nineteenth-century literacy textbooks, is not only significant for the way it primes the reader to take pleasure in Stein's oeuvre as a whole—teaching us to recognize and find value in our own limitations as readers—but also because the “childish” reading practices it attempts to instill—its celebration of error, unmastery, and even ignorance—also pre-empt those practices associated with theory's recent rejection of suspicious, symptomatic, and paranoid models of reading.⁹ This critical turn seemingly began with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation of a queer “reparative reading” and has developed into a broader attack on modes of critique rooted in the hermeneutics of suspicion famously associated with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche by Paul Ricoeur.¹⁰ Stein's anti-developmental pedagogy suggests, however, that there is a longer history to queer reparative reading. By putting her “juvenile for adults” into dialogue with theorizations of anti-suspicious reading practices, I want to identify childishness as an important trope for thinking through contemporary styles in criticism and pedagogy, one which allows us to keep in view the specifically queer origins of the reparative turn.

*

There is something perverse about a first reader that begins by exploring the possibility of *not* learning to read. Stein's *First Reader* opens with the story of a dog whose apparently resolute determination to acquire literacy ends in failure:

He might be drowned dead in water but if he said he was going to learn to read he was going to learn to read.

He never was drowned in water nor dead drowned and he never did learn to

read.¹¹

In lesson four, Stein again suggests a surprising ambivalence towards her *First Reader's* ostensible project. The short sketch describes a community that can tell the days of week by observing the changes in a character called Baby Benjamin. Consequently, the lesson determines, "it was not necessary to read or write" (p. 23). The *First Reader* also strays from more conventional pedagogy by questioning the value of knowledge. In lesson thirteen, we encounter a little girl, Jenny, who wonders why the flowers she picks are always gone when she gets home:

Now why was it.

If anybody could tell her it would help her or would it not. (p. 39)

In the only published article devoted exclusively to Stein's *First Reader*, Dana Cairns Watson offers a careful account of the kind of alternative, ludic pedagogy performed by the book. In the course of arguing that the "better reader" "built" by Stein's book is one with a tolerance for multiple meanings, Watson implies that any Steinian understanding of "better" might challenge the normative ideal of fluency: "fluid reading and the utilitarian texts we are likely to have read since we were six may have divorced most of us from that playful awareness of words."¹² This playful, anti-utilitarian attitude towards language has long been understood as central to Stein's work. What has not been so well recognized are the less immediately appealing (and less obviously modernist) qualities implied by non-fluency. When Watson suggests that Stein's "reader gets to be sleuth and treasure hunter, both," she suggests that a form of mastery can coexist with this abandonment of "fluid reading" (p. 261). The reader as sleuth or treasure hunter is a reader who, driven by an epistemophilic impulse, cleverly and heroically unveils hidden truths for those less competent than him or herself. This reader, as explained below, is the

“paranoid” or “suspicious” reader identified at the turn of the twenty-first century by Sedgwick and others—a reader who, I want to argue, is quite distinct from the one Stein wishes to build with her *First Reader*, as she chooses instead to celebrate the forms of incompetency and failure that are necessary (if often conspicuously ignored) components of her particular style of play.

Sedgwick’s influential essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” first appeared in 1997 as the introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*.¹³ Here Sedgwick identifies a mode of suspicious reading that she claims has come to predominate in contemporary criticism. Paranoid critical practices adopt an “anticipatory” style that is characterised by an “aversion to surprise,” a desire to forestall pain through the possession of knowledge (p. 130). In this respect, paranoid reading is “a theory of negative affects” that sacrifices the possibility of finding unexpected pleasure in its objects for the security of not being hoodwinked. Stein illustrates such an impulse in her *First Reader*’s initial lesson, where the children want to learn to read not because of the delights this new skill might unlock but, less positively, because it would “annoy” them if they could not fix the meaning of particular homophones (p. 11). Stein, like Sedgwick, asks us to think about the limitations of this approach: “Think of the little girl with or without a curl who could not allow a cow to be a cow because she did not know how to read a cow” (p. 12). The little girl is willing to miss out on the experience of the cow’s cowness, as it were, because this pleasure is trumped by her desire for knowledge and mastery. Stein’s aim is to turn this paranoid reader into a reparative reader by the end of her book.

Sedgwick draws on the object relations psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein to develop her contrast between paranoid and reparative reading practices. In Klein, the paranoid-schizoid position is when internal objects—which are our senses of people or things based on the

particular experience their presence produces within ourselves—are perceived as being entirely good or entirely bad. This polarization of good or bad is called the splitting of the object; a mixed object, from the paranoid position, is seen as two objects—a good one and a bad one. Furthermore, as the child or adult experiences love and hate towards these objects, this produces a similar splitting of the self, between the good and bad self. In the depressive position, however, one is able to sustain ambivalence and appreciate someone or something as a simultaneously good and bad object. The depressive position produces guilt but also gives rise to the process of reparation through which the internal world can be repaired.¹⁴ Through reparation, the split objects can be, as Sedgwick puts it, “assembled into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*. Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” (p. 128). As Sedgwick’s comments suggest, for Klein, the reparative impulse is constructive and creative. Equally, it is a form of love, but a realistic love that does not approach the love object as an “idealized uncontaminated good one.”¹⁵ The “additive and accretive” reparative impulse is, for Sedgwick, precisely what allows queer selves and communities to “[extract] sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has not been to sustain them” (pp.149, 150-51).

While Sedgwick admits that paranoia was foundational for queer studies as a “privileged *object* of antihomophobic theory,” she argues that its function as the privileged methodology renders invisible significant queer practices; it might instead serve us better to consider paranoia as simply one of a variety of possible attitudes (p. 126). The distinctive aspects of Sedgwick’s reparative reading—and its status as a distinctly *queer* mode of reading—lie in its renunciation of the “mature” critical values of mastery, epistemophilia, rigour, foresight, and strength. As

opposed to the triumphant master of hermeneutics who confidently unveils and exposes meaning and prefers “strong” theories marked by their “wide reach and rigorous exclusiveness,” the “weak” theories of the reparative reader limit themselves to the description of more local phenomena and are characterized by a “sustained *seeking of pleasure*” that produces a tolerance for surprise and even error (pp. 134, 135, 137). Sedgwick illustrates a reparative approach by quoting Joseph Litvak, who writes of the “queer energy” that goes into “practices aimed at taking the terror out of error. . . . Doesn’t reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?” (p. 147). If queer readings are not always reparative, Stein, as I will demonstrate, allows us to see that reparative readings have at their core an embrace of values associated with the childish. While not all queerness is childish, childishness, as we shall see, is always rather queer.

In the subsequent decades, a number of critics have followed Sedgwick in attacking reading practices rooted in suspicion, articulating “a desire for intimacy with objects of study they neither master nor disdain.”¹⁶ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have even described this reparative approach as “The Way We Read Now.”¹⁷ Critics participating in this turn have collectively made a case for surface reading, just reading, and flat reading; for reading literally, uncritically, or post-critically; for describing rather than interpreting; for proffering weak rather than strong theories. They are less concerned with exposing and correcting texts than in being moved and delighted by them.¹⁸ However, a significant proportion of the anti-suspicious criticism I am describing here is in no way framed as an examination of queer reading; the queerness that is crucial for Sedgwick’s theory has become detachable from the anti-suspicious approach, as it has been taken up, in various forms, by other critics.

Many of the characteristics that I will attribute to Stein's advocacy of childishness can also be discerned in the ostensibly non-queer versions of these theories. In the opening paragraph of his "Rejected Review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*," for instance, Mark Wollaeger demonstrates the childish delight produced by forsaking critique; he describes drawing smiley faces, or "doofuses," in the margin as he reads, but his scholarly training makes him worry that they make him "look a little dopey, perhaps mildly contemptible."¹⁹ However, while in Wollaeger's account of the non-suspicious reader, this childishness is in no way related to queerness, for Sedgwick "the contingent figure of a child" who "loves 'the most stretched and ragged edges of [her] competence'" is in fact central to the articulation of reparative reading as a particularly queer practice.²⁰ As early as 1993, Sedgwick articulated a form of reading that, in its description of loving and drawing nourishment from cultural objects, sounds much like what she would later term reparative:

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects.²¹

This discussion of (reparative) queer reading and pedagogy is, significantly, also a meditation on the importance of a remembered childhood for queer theory. Queer critics, Sedgwick claims, "are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood."²² Sedgwick is not so much invoking the figure of the child as an emblem for futurity as reaching back to her own child self. As Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark argue, it is "the

cleaving of one's adulthood to one's former childhood that enables, sustains, and nurtures the kinds of reading practices engaged by Sedgwick and other queer theorists."²³ If paranoid reading for Sedgwick "takes its shape from a generational narrative that is characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness," reparative approaches might offer a less rigid temporality and conform to a less normative developmental logic (*Touching, Feeling*, p. 147). Sedgwick's reparative reader is at once queer and childish; indeed, her queerness and her childishness are inseparable.

The connections between the reparative, the queer, and the childish that I want to consider by looking at Stein's self-performance, her engagement with nineteenth-century literacy textbooks, and crucially, her *First Reader* are perhaps most clearly articulated by Jack Halberstam's 2011 work *The Queer Art of Failure*.²⁴ Halberstam's self-described "low theory" methodology reflects a departure from the conventions of symptomatic critique: it is a "[mode] of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve"; it welcomes "the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising"; and it values silliness, stupidity, frivolity, and ignorance as it invites us to "*resist mastery*" (pp. 15, 16, 11). Situating this work on the margins of scholarly acceptability, eschewing rigor and "disciplinary correctness" for "flights of fancy" or even "intuition and blind fumbling," Halberstam draws sustenance from cultural objects that "do not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry," including animated children's films (pp. 6, 20). Furthermore, Halberstam explicitly links these critical practices to a child-figure who possesses "a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure" (p. 120) The child emerges as the consummate reparative reader: "children

resist ready-made meaning, ignore heavy-handed morality, and pay careful attention to details in a film that most adults might pass over” (p. 181). Yet in its celebration of the way that “failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children,” Halberstam’s book exploits the ontological uncertainty of the category of the child (p. 3). While its argument is situated within recent studies that emphasize the queerness of children—whose heteronormativity cannot be taken for granted but is in fact carefully managed—*The Queer Art of Failure* also emphasizes the childishness of queer culture, with its distinct anti-developmental logic, its “immaturity and a refusal of adulthood” (p. 73).²⁵ Throughout Halberstam’s book, with its non-paranoid approaches to imperfect cultural objects, reparative reading practices emerge as one of the points of suture between a consideration of the relationship between the childish and the queer.

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A repeated image occurs in some of the most sensitive accounts of Stein’s radically defamiliarizing writing: an adult reader adopting the position of the child learning to read.²⁶ Michael Davidson observes that Stein undermines habitual models of reading “with the simplest of language only so that we may read for the first time—again,” and introducing her own *Stein Reader*, Ulla E. Dydo notes that her selection “also becomes a primer. It returns us to the schoolroom where Stein asks what the three Rs are and teaches us to read in ways more fundamental than we had thought possible, more literal than we had known.”²⁷ Steven Meyer writes that one is obliged to attend to Stein’s sentences

as much as she did: painstakingly, word by word, as children do in mastering the first and second of the three R’s until the procedures necessary for fluency finally, *finally*, become

habitual. Yet, in Stein's case, the object was neither fluency nor ever-improving habits. For her, lasting accomplishment, at once scientific and literary, resided in the singular success she exhibited in rendering the organic mechanisms that operate in all sentence composition and comprehension—that is to say, in rendering them *visible*.²⁸

In all cases, the image of the novice reader serves to articulate the way that Stein's modernism estranges language, overturns habitual reading practices, and invites fresh—indeed, childlike—modes of perception. But within such arguments is also a more or less implicit argument for the value of something that comes closer to what we might term *childishness*, something that speaks to the qualities enumerated by Halberstam above. Although the emphasis tends to fall more on the empowering effects of such a childlike vision—how it offers revelations about language that habit tends to render invisible—these accounts also recognize the halting, stumbling, unfluent, and incompetent reading practices that accompany this process. While Meyer considers unfluency in terms of Stein's ultimate mastery (“lasting accomplishment”), he still acknowledges that her aim—unlike, significantly, that of the children's educator—is not to produce a more competent or “better” reader in the conventional sense.²⁹ In *Children's Culture and the Avant-Garde* (2013), Marilyn Strasser Olson suggests that the distinction between childlikeness and childishness in modernist art often hinges on ideas of competency: “‘primitive’ refers to ‘childishness’ (rather than ‘childlikeness’) on the part of the artist. In [Christopher] Butler's phrase, ‘incompetent *rather than* Modern.’”³⁰ It is this sense of incompetence that Stein's *First Reader* cultivates in particular. The work invites a maladroit childishness as opposed to—or at least, alongside—the more utopian constructions that often inform modernist investments in the childlike.³¹ Unlike childlikeness, childishness is not generally regarded as a privileged position; to be childish is to be willful rather than naïve, clumsy and inept rather than instinctually

insightful. If childlikeness is pure and suggests untutored abilities to understand and fresh modes of perception, childishness is perverse; whether in a child or an adult, it is never considered appropriate or desirable to be childish. The particular model of childishness that the *First Reader* celebrates invites us to take seriously the infamous comments of Wyndham Lewis, who demanded, in relation to Stein, “What you have to ask yourself is why, exactly, a grown person should wish to be a child?—for to use the forms of infantile or immature life, to make an art of its technical imperfections, and to exploit its natural ignorance, is, in some sense, to wish to be a child.”³² The *First Reader* forces us to engage with the terms of some of the author’s most insistent detractors, to read their critique reparatively.³³

Lewis connects childishness with queerness, remarking “how contemporary inverted-sex fashions are affiliated to the Child-cult” (p. 70). As I have suggested, queerness necessarily disrupts the clear divisions between maturity and immaturity. Carol Mavor puts it succinctly when referring to her cast of male subjects in *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (2007): “They are neither man nor boy, neither little nor big: they are boyish. The ‘ish’ keeps them swishy.”³⁴ This condition of being betwixt and between is central to how both Stein and her work have been perceived. One of the interesting things about accounts of Stein’s childish or childlike qualities is that they differ on the precise degree of her immaturity. Alongside frequent depictions of her as a babbling baby, Kenneth Burke refers to her writing as “expressed . . . girlishly,” and one contemporaneous review of *Brewsie and Willie* (1946) significantly conjures her as an unusually precocious adolescent: “a twelve-year-old-girl full of intelligence and sensitive curiosity and very brilliant, more brilliant than any girl ever was at twelve.”³⁵ This sense that Stein might be queerly out of step with developmental norms is also captured in the way that our image of her has tended to be

frozen in her mid- to late adulthood, starting perhaps with the image of Picasso's portrait. Attempting to address this issue in her 1995 biography of Stein's early life, Linda Wagner-Martin remarks that "it is one of the enigmas of current literary history that Gertrude Stein seems never to have been a child, an adolescent, a college woman, or a medical school student."³⁶ Stein figures as a kind of perpetual big baby; called the Mama of Dada and the Mother Goose of Montparnasse, her adult female corpulence is as fixed a part of her image as her baby talk. I have suggested that the back and forth movement between maturity and childhood is one characteristic of the reparative position, but equally, the very notion of the reparative *as a* position, which one can access repeatedly at different points of one's life, is helpful here. As Sedgwick emphasizes, the "flexible to-and-fro movement implicit in Kleinian *positions*" can be distinguished from "normatively ordered stages, stable structures, or diagnostic personality types" (p. 128). Similarly, the reader imagined by the *First Reader* is neither a child nor an adult per se, but a subject who escapes the logic of developmental stages to occupy the position of childishness.

Stein adopted this position herself when Scott suggested that she produce a children's reader. She recalls the form with pleasure in a letter to Carl Van Vechten:

I am quite excited about Gertrude Stein's First Reader only I have not heard anything from [John] McCullough and do not quite know what it should be, do you remember that when I was somewhere in the West they gave me a volume a sweet little volume of Reading without tears, and it was wonderful reading . . . but I did think they would like To Do but they didn't, and do I know what the little children do, do, well anyway I know what Baby Woojums does do she does whatever Papa Woojums wants her to do so here goes for a First Reader and a cuckoo . . . but what does a First Reader do, I remember so well

McGuffey and Appleton's Third Reader, I don't seem when I went to school to have had a first and Second Reader, I seem only to have had a Third Reader, perhaps in East Oakland where we were fond of skipping a grade we skipped Two Readers right away, anyway I will try right away, but would they do To Do if they had this other one to do, To Do might [be] a fifth Reader, was there one, I still only remember the Third, well spring is the time for a first reader and Spring has come.³⁷

Stein did not wait for further instructions from McCullough but went ahead and wrote her *First Reader*. In sharp contrast to the Bank Street authors, Stein admits her lack of knowledge about actual twentieth-century children and educational practices and, in positioning herself as the reader, appears uninterested in acquiring this knowledge. She turns to memories of the American graduated textbooks of her own childhood, McGuffey and Appleton, and to one discovered much later in life, *Reading Without Tears: Or, a Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read*, a basic primer first published in London in 1857 by the British educator (and early flash-card pioneer) Favell Lee Mortimer. Stein's interest and delight in the literacy textbook has little to do with its pedagogical value for any potential child reader, rather *she* is the child. Her attitude demonstrates "the cleaving of one's adulthood to one's former childhood" that characterizes reparative reading—Stein's past and present selves collide in her appreciation of the form as she invokes the childish persona of "Baby Woojums." A similar attitude emerged in an earlier letter to Van Vechten, where Stein discusses the rejection of *To Do*:

About To Do . . . you know I am not at all stuck on its being a child's book, I called it a child's book, because it was about alphabets and birthdays but children says Alice have not [i.e., no] monopoly of these things so Mama Woojums has always believed that Papa Woojums was right, and that people will love it but not as a child's book so when you

pass it on to Mr. Gilman Low III of Scribners we won't tell him that it is a child's book since Papa Woojums who knows says it is not, and Mama Woojums who knows that Papa Woojums knows says it is not, and Baby Woojums wants everybody to like it, and is not at all keen on children's wanting it not at all not at all.³⁸

In cutesy baby talk, Stein expresses her desire that “everybody” like *To Do* and that apparently childish things need not be monopolized by children. Indeed, she suggests that her category of “everybody” may not in fact include children—Stein writes instead for the *childish*.

Stein's pleasure in the nineteenth-century literacy textbook might seem surprising. From 1836 (and for nearly a hundred years) on, the standard pedagogical texts in American schoolrooms were William Holmes McGuffey's series of six graduated readers, which, alongside his primer, spellers, and rhetorical guides, tasked themselves with both the literacy and moral instruction of his young readers. Viewing Stein's *First Reader* as a parody of textbooks like McGuffey's might help us to account for two of its distinctive and somewhat unsettling qualities: its concern with death and other traumatic themes and what Barbara Will calls its “starkly authoritative voice.”³⁹ Some of its darker content, such as in lesson fourteen, when a “lonesome” soldier tells his woe to a farmer's wife (“I come from a place where they have been bombarding”) makes sense in the context of McGuffey, where death was, according to Stanley W. Lindberg, “confronted directly and frequently.”⁴⁰ The *First Reader* ends in an ostensibly moralistic and authoritarian fashion with a long list of warnings, each beginning “Be careful” (pp. 55-56). This kind of voice, Will argues, is “precisely the kind . . . one might expect to hear in wartime in military proclamations or warnings designed to control a civilian population.”⁴¹ Will quotes the beginning and ending of the two pages of this final lesson but elides the middle section, where it is hard to ignore the comical nature of many of the warnings: “Be very careful

of Many many can tickle you” (p. 55). In this respect the lesson is similar in style to lesson eleven, which makes a mockery of conduct guides, suggesting that politeness in children is as arbitrary a quality as anxiety in milk: “Now when butter is careless, and milk is anxious, and potatoes are mournful and spinach is angry . . . well then when that happy time has come it is very necessary that every little boy and every little girl says how do you do” (p. 34).

McGuffey’s propensity towards awful warnings and moral maxims is well known; the cautionary “Things to Remember,” for instance, which first appeared in the *Second Reader* in 1838, reminds the reader of the importance of trusting in God, not eating “like a pig,” and obeying one’s parents.⁴² The reader form was not solely moralistic, however. Introducing her own *Stein Reader*, Dydo cites McGuffey as a shorthand for stifling, antipoetic linguistic orthodoxy:

The texts in this book teach lessons of the schoolroom for the twentieth century and for modernism. In the *Sixth Eclectic Reader* of 1857, William Holmes McGuffey answered the question of language, “Which shall yield, the poet or established usage? Certainly not the latter.” In the fragmented worlds of Whitman and Stein, usage lost its authority.⁴³

Dydo acknowledges McGuffey as an important part of the “schooling in the American tradition of public speaking, elocution, lecturing” that lies behind Stein.⁴⁴ Many of Stein’s most famous works bear similarities in form and tone with various instructional texts; one could place *Tender Buttons* (1914), which critics have compared to a household manual and a Girl Scout handbook, alongside titles such as *How to Write* (1931) and “How Writing is Written” (1935).⁴⁵ Dydo’s two rather different references to McGuffey are suggestive of Stein’s complex relationship to convention (moral and linguistic), and more specifically, of the way such pedagogical texts were both sources of inspiration and representative of the staid relationships to language that her work

sought to challenge. We might also say that Stein's approach to the reader form was reparative. As Sedgwick said of her childhood reading practices: "We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love."⁴⁶ Stein's "fascination and love" for the form should not be understood as residing exclusively in its value as an object of parody or pastiche.

Turning to McGuffey's version of "the cat sat on the mat," we can appreciate why such exercises might please the woman who wrote "I am a grammarian I do not hesitate but I rearrange prepositions."⁴⁷ McGuffey's lesson reads:

eăt măt ı̇ş ön

-e t ı̇ m ş

The cat. The mat.

Is the cat on the mat?

The cat is on the mat.⁴⁸

Crucially, any sense of the naturalness of utterances or linguistic order is undermined in this lesson and basic sentence construction is rendered transparent and unfamiliar. In teaching basic reading skills, such exercises involve atomizing and reordering simple phrases, making ordinary language strange and showing the fine line between order and disorder.

Literacy textbooks invite us to attend to the parts of sentences most often ignored by mature readers—the parts that interest Stein the most. In "Poetry and Grammar" (1935), Stein famously discussed her lack of interest in the noun, which returns language to the referential, expressing a preference for the linguistic items that are less conspicuous in habitual use, such as articles, which are "delicate" and "varied and alive."⁴⁹ Stein plays with articles in her *How to*

Write chapter “Sentences,” where she elevates them from their usual supporting role to the focus of interest:

A an article. A an article.

A the same.

A and the. An and the.

The this that not.⁵⁰

One exercise from the nineteenth-century text *Reading Without Tears* focuses on the article “an” in particular, listing a series of words with the article and then using them in sentences:

An axē An ad-der

An ox An em-met

An egg An ill-ness

An ēyē An or-gan

.....

An axē has cut my k̄nee.

An ad-der has bit my leg.

An em-met is not so big as a bee.

Did you see the man in the gar-den? He has an or-gan on his back.⁵¹

Here words and phrases find their organizational principle in the repeated use of articles, the units of grammar that in most ordinary and poetic language are determined by nouns rather than give rise to them. Just as when we read *Tender Buttons*, we can find semantic and narrative connections between phrases and sentences (in this case, for instance, we can see themes emerging around animals, pain, and violence) but this feels much like a secondary effect and not Stein’s principal aim. In *How to Write*’s “Arthur A Grammar,” Stein captures the way that

grammar is both liberating and binding: “Grammar bound. // Bound as abound” and “Suppose a grammar uses invention.”⁵² Although Stein is well known for what Juliana Spahr calls her “grammatical deviance,” such deviance also requires attention to the rules.⁵³ Marjorie Perloff has argued that Stein, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, is interested in grammar as description rather than prescription, and Charles Bernstein sees Stein as “*redefining by constituting* (rather than transgressing) the ‘law’—as any grammarian must.”⁵⁴ That dedicated attention to grammar paradoxically creates phrases that *sound* random or anarchic is no surprise to readers of Stein or the otherwise conventional literary textbook.

*

Although Stein’s avowed pleasure in the reader suggests her own reparative impulses, it is clear that the readerly qualities associated with the reparative position—the embrace of unmastery, error, and surprise—are not those promoted by McGuffey and other primer authors. Indeed, for Spahr, the literacy textbook is actually shorthand for the fluency that Stein’s work challenges: “for those of us schooled in Dick and Jane, Stein’s writing also provides an unsettling challenge to our reliance on our mastery of English conventions when reading.”⁵⁵ As Spahr implies, literacy textbooks *do* aim to fulfil a transformative role: to turn an incompetent but attentive reader into a fluent, automatic reader. Because Stein wishes to cultivate the experience of incompetency rather than help her readers move beyond it, her *First Reader* must depart from the developmental logic underpinning textbooks, a logic to which William R. Scott’s children’s writers were still supposed to conform, no matter how progressive or modernist their aspirations.

The first two lessons in the *First Reader* are particularly significant in their suggestion that linguistic experimentation might depend on a form of incompetence, a suggestion that undermines the mastery of the teacher. In lesson one, the “daily bird” appears as a figure who adopts the limited view of the authority on linguistic correctness: “Saying a word even a big word is not the same as reading that word. Oh no said the daily bird no indeed it is not, not, not knot” (p. 9). The daily bird here understands “successful” reading as a way of clearing up the apparent confusions when we hear a homophone like not/knot: “Just notice that if you say not knot, how do you know if you do not know how to read, which knot has a knot, and which not has not a knot. So you see you have to learn to read. The daily bird knew what was what” (p. 9). The way that the daily bird, with absolute confidence, characterizes learning to read as a method of clearing up difficulty, confusion, and “knottedness” invites us to recall Stein’s well-known claim in “Poetry and Grammar” that if the rules are too clear, grammar becomes a prescription rather than a game.⁵⁶ Stein dislikes “servile” commas, for instance, because they do our thinking for us: “When it gets really difficult you want to disentangle rather than cut the knot. . . . And what does a comma do, a comma does nothing but make easy a thing that if you like it enough is easy enough without the comma. A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it and the comma.”⁵⁷ For Stein, the process of meaning-making should not be automatic; we should experience it as an effort. The daily bird, rather than imagining reading as a way to “make you know yourself knowing” the complexity of a sentence, suggests that the ability to read with fluency is a route to stabilizing meaning, to simply cutting the knot.

The daily bird’s more conventional views on reading are countered by the lesson’s proliferation of homographs, which teach Stein’s readers that meaning is not irrevocably fixed

through simply learning to recognize letter patterns visually. Furthermore, the ordinary knowledge of experience allows us to tell the difference between words that look and sound the same. The reader is reminded of the multiple referents for the word “bed” and the way “down,” with no differentiation in spelling, might refer to the feathers of a pillow or the action of descending the stairs: “Bed bed when any dog says bed bed, he means a cushion a basket a kennel or straw but when any child says bed he means a bed stead where he can lay himself down without a frown and with a pillow made of down. . . . Who cares which way down is spelt but it is spelt the same whether it is in the bed or out” (*First Reader*, p. 10). In this sense the reader has nothing to learn; being more technically competent does not really alter our understanding. Then, while ostensibly taking a somewhat different track by appearing to follow the daily bird’s contention that reading is understanding, the *First Reader* actually begins to demonstrate Spahr’s contention that “it is the shift from reading to (re)reading that is necessary to make sense of much of Stein’s work”⁵⁸:

So, now sew and so, so is so and sew is not so, you see to know whether sew is so or so is sew how necessary it is so that is to read is so necessary so it is. And read just think of read if red is read, and read is read, you see when all is said, just now read just then read, do you see even if a little boy or a little girl is very well fed if they do not read how can they know whether red is read and read is red. (p. 11)

Here rhyme seems to be helping the reader make decisions about pronunciation and therefore sense. Spahr writes: “When reading this passage the reader sees reading as a variable process. Through these visual puns, the meaning of words become mobile and mutating as the reader must stop, adjust content and context of the surrounding words, separate from any easy moment of reading, to (re)read to figure out the sound the word ‘read’ makes.”⁵⁹

It is interesting to imagine what destabilizing consequences such re-reading might have in pedagogical settings, where a teacher reads the text with or to the pupil. Such a situation would quickly mark reading as a site of error or at least an activity that requires constant readjustment and self-correction; the competence of the pedagogue would be brought into question, and as we shall see, a model reader might emerge in the figure who incorporates error into the reading process. But it is perhaps also important to acknowledge that even re-reading cannot provide any final mastery of the text, and the hints in the example above that, as Spahr suggests, help us to understand how each “read” should sound, are only hints. The proximity of “read” to “red” and “fed” offers only a rough guide, not least because sound patterns, especially in prose, are not governed by any kind of rule equivalent to the grammar with which a first reader would normally be concerned. Stein plays with the idea that rhyming patterns can work against other kinds of meaning in *The World is Round*, where the rhyme in the chapter title “Rose Saw It Close” links “close” with “shut,” while the text that follows makes “close” as in “near” the more likely meaning.⁶⁰ As a structure for determining meaning, rhyme sits—as Stein might put it—“on the edge of grammar” as a system that produces a form of order that still leaves room for disorder.⁶¹

Stein continues her unorthodox teaching in lesson two, where a little boy tries to explain to his friends that he has learned a new word. This dialogue enacts a form of confusion—between the linguistic example and the language used to present it—that will be familiar to Stein’s readers and that plays a particularly prominent role in *How to Write*:

A little boy said I read a new word to-day.

What did you say.

The little boy said I read a new word to-day.

What word they said.

You guess he said.

Guess that's a new word.

No said the little boy not that. (*First Reader*, p. 16)⁶²

The confusion here, as elsewhere in Stein, is between the words that grab our attention and those we tend to read beyond. Stein is, as we have seen, especially interested in the little words that often go unnoticed in sentences, and the confusion she generates here is part of her ongoing project to make reading as non-habitual for everyone as it is for those learning to read, like the little boy in the lesson. However, what seems distinct here is that the real “lesson” (that we have less control than we imagine over both our own meaning and the meanings of others) occurs as the boy tries to report what he has already formally learned. Taken together, lessons one and two suggest the value of a learning that is separate from teaching. In lesson one, the daily bird takes on the role of the competent reader/teacher who is not alert to the potentially confusing, problematic (and, we might add, interesting) things about language that are revealed to us through the *First Reader*'s children. In lesson two, as one child attempts to communicate his own learning to others, his sense of mastery is destabilized by their apparent ignorance; the ignorance teaches something that the official lesson has not. In both cases, we see that a “childish” incompetence—and the experience of coming to feel and recognize this incompetence—gets one closer to an appreciation of linguistic complexity and instability than the position of mature mastery.

In this respect, we might consider the *First Reader*'s pedagogy as a version of the practice Stein adopted when, after lecturing at the University of Chicago, she was invited to teach a class with Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, educational reformers and founders of the university's Great Books curriculum:

I said you see why they talk to me is that I am like them I do not know the answer, you say you do not know but you do know if you did not know the answer you could not spend your life in teaching but I I really do not know, I really do not, I do not even know whether there is a question let alone having an answer for a question. To me when a thing is really interesting it is when there is no question and no answer, if there is then already the subject is not interesting and it is so, that is the reason that anything for which there is a solution is not interesting, that is the trouble with governments and Utopias and teaching, the things not that can be learnt but that can be taught are not interesting.⁶³

Although Stein suggests the impossibility of teaching, her presence in the classroom apparently had quite powerful effects; Hutchins told her, “you did make them all talk more than we can make them and a number of them talked who never talked before.”⁶⁴ In occupying a position of ignorance, Stein as “teacher” opened up for the Chicago students the possibility of different ways of learning. Her role was that of Jacques Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmaster,” Joseph Jacotot, the eighteenth-century professor who taught his Flemish-speaking students in French (a language they could not speak) because he did not know Flemish.⁶⁵ Jacotot’s realization that his students had actually managed to understand the French in their lesson forced him to reassess his own role in the learning process: “*the fact was that his students had learned to speak and to write in French without the aid of explication*” (p. 9). In unmastering the master, Stein elides the divisions that Rancière associates with “the myth of pedagogy”: “a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid” (p. 5).

More recently, such divisions have been challenged by anti-suspicious-reading critics like Felski, who attacks “the creation of a great divide between critique and common sense [which]

condemns everyday language to a state of slow-wittedness and servitude” and who indeed cites Rancière as a participant in “a substantial tradition of modern thought that has circumvented or challenged the logic of critique.”⁶⁶ Halberstam’s formulation of “low theory” also draws on Rancière (pp. 13-20), and Sedgwick attempts to narrow the gap between the scholar and the common reader in her elaboration of Tomkins’s “weak” theory, which claims that “there is no distance at all” between the scientific and philosophical theorizing of affects and the everyday theorizing we all do as we manage our own and others’ feelings (p. 133). Works such as *Lectures in America*, in which Stein appears to take on the role of teacher-theorist, notably lack any specialist critical terminology, but the *First Reader* offers special—and critically unmined—insights into her ongoing attempt to dismantle the “myth of pedagogy.”

If Stein’s emphasis on unmastery invites different reading and learning habits from those normally associated with the textbook, she also advances particular aspects of her characteristic reading practices through her rather subversive uses of specific tropes commonly associated with reader form. One such trope is the repetition for which Stein is notorious—that characteristic of her writing that might appear the most obvious point of connection between her writing for adults and her own and others’ writing for children. Repetition is of course used in children’s writing not only for explicitly pedagogical reasons but to impart a sense of (false) mastery as children are able to preempt the meaning of texts they cannot yet read competently. Stein’s understanding of her putative repetition is of course quite complex, and she famously theorized the difference between repetition as variation and as a less mobile “insistence” in “Portraits and Repetition.”⁶⁷ This same distinction is explored in one of Stein’s most provocatively “repetitive” texts, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress* (1925), in which her narrator explains:

Always, one having loving repeating to getting completed understanding must have in them an open feeling, a sense for all the slightest variations in repeating, must never lose themselves so in the solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation. If they get deadened by the steady pounding of repeating they will not learn from each one even though each one always is repeating the whole of them they will not learn the completed history of them.⁶⁸

Here, the value of repetition is to be found in our attention to difference rather than sameness; we cannot learn if the repetition lulls us into ignoring variation. Although Stein soon abandoned her project to give a “completed history” of everyone, this understanding of the relationship between repetition, variation, and learning continues to inform her writing in the *First Reader*.

Stein avoids the “solid steadiness of all repeating” through minor variations in capitalization, punctuation, and word order and demonstrates how our desire to propel a narrative forward might encourage us to mistake formal variation for straightforward repetition. Indeed, the *First Reader*'s repetitions are more likely to produce inaccuracy than mastery. In lesson seven, a “by the time x is y” formula starts off logically enough (“By the time dates are ripe, by the time bananas are yellow”), but the repetition's usefulness as a way of gaining any purchase on the narrative soon starts to wane: “by the time water is blue by the time children are lost by the time too they are found through having been put to, work and play too, by the time it is not easy to have to do what they do by the time they are through by the time they two can read one and two and you and true, so they do” (pp. 27, 28). While the reader starts to recognize the formulaic pattern and so acquires some sense of competence, this pattern soon becomes the vehicle for producing a sense of unfamiliarity. As the lesson progresses, the formula becomes less useful in denotive terms, although importantly not to the same extent in all cases—“by the

time water is blue” is clearly a stranger proposition than “by the time they are through”—so we are encouraged to attend to the formula carefully rather than simply read past it. Crucially, the repetitive structure does not help us to pre-empt meaning but to pay closer attention to both images and sounds. Rather than attempting to promote a sense of mastery produced by prediction and habit and creating a reader “deadened by the steady pounding of repeating,” Stein refuses to allow her reader to become entirely comfortable. The “open feeling” created in such instances is an openness towards the unexpected as we are forced to slow down, re-read, and attend to the particularities of the text. Stein’s use of half-patterns and variations within repetitions is one way of unseating a “mature” form of reading in which competence has produced a form of inattention that rushes to the acceptable, most likely understanding rather than the one that best honors the complexity of the utterance. Stein invites us to grapple with meaning that may in fact take form in its own inarticulacy. We might, for instance, see one Steinian reading model in the figure of Willie Caesar who, in lesson three’s re-telling of Humpty Dumpty, compulsively counts the letter *w* (pp. 18-20). This halting, obsessive (Nancy Bombaci calls it “autistic”) mode of reading is not the kind associated with a full, mature, and proficient understanding of the text but, as a form of narrowly focused attention, indeed has much in common with Stein’s forensic approach to language.⁶⁹ It is this “receptiveness and fidelity to the text’s surface, as opposed to suspicious and aggressive attacks on its concealed depths” that Best and Marcus identify as one of the primary characteristics of non-suspicious criticism.⁷⁰ Stein’s *First Reader* pre-empts this recent critical turn by teaching us to “just read” rather than read over, behind, or beyond the surface of the text.

One strategy Stein employs for drawing our attention to the surface and halting our fluency is her famous use of grammatical error. In “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein professes her

love for the groups of words that most readily invite mistakes, such as prepositions (p. 212). Meyer refers to Stein's use of "deliberate error," which he understands as a form of competence that is "always distinguishable from nondeliberate error, although often not by very much," and which "served as the basic compositional device for her experimental writing."⁷¹ Meyer argues that "Deliberate error is error that may nonetheless be correct, error, that is, with the means for correction built into it. If such error requires deliberation, it also rewards it."⁷² Stein's *First Reader* suggests that there is in fact room for both (or at least, different) forms of error, including forms that give pleasures distinct from those produced by the masterful act of correction. The *First Reader* does not always reframe error in a way that makes it look simply like another variety of competence—competence in disguise—but it also suggests the ways that error might require competence, thus undermining any "mature" assumption of a clear division between competence and incompetence.

Lesson six teaches that careful deliberation of error does not necessarily result in its correction but rather that accepting the confusion produced by the error is more valuable than deciding how to resolve it. Stein's lesson relates to the complexities of identity—a topic that several critics have found central to her children's books.⁷³ She narrates the story of two boys who measure themselves back to back and, in the process, produce some confusion about who is who. Their entirely relational system of measuring implies that identity is not self-present but rather dependent on otherness. Importantly, Stein uses error productively, failing to standardize the spellings of the boys' names in a way that contributes to this understanding of identity:

Just why Johnnie was Jimmie.

Just why Jimmie was Johnny.

.....

. . . . Which was Johnnie and which was Jimmie or was Johnnie just Jimmie and was Jimmie just Johnny and just back to back. (p. 25)

The variation in spelling describes the boy who is not Jimmy as both Johnnie and Johnny. His identity, dependent as it is on differentiation, incorporates alterity. Correcting the mistake is not the point here; to inhabit the position of the teacher, or the scholar engaging in critique, would be to ignore the complexity of the utterance. Furthermore, the impulse to correct the error would only arise *if* we recognized it as such. As Adam Phillips writes, “in order to make a mistake, of course, one has to know the rules. Error is a function of competence. Or to put it another way, in what sense do young children make mistakes? Because, in a sense, becoming acculturated is learning what it is to make a mistake.”⁷⁴ One way of engaging with this particular lesson would be not to read its errors *as errors* but to read “childishly”—to attempt to unlearn the rules that allow for the production of mistakes, to refuse queerly the passage into fluency, competence, and adulthood.

If this all sounds delightfully implausible—how, exactly, might we unlearn what it is to err?—Stein’s *First Reader* also suggests the more realistic proposition of “taking the terror out of error,” as Litvak puts it. This proposition is broached in lesson one, where Stein’s approach to error initially seems to have more in common with that of the traditional literacy textbook, where mistakes must be recognized as such: “Think about spelling without yelling spell oh spell potatoe and know it is so. Potatoe, even if so has no e and potatoe has an e on toe. Potatoe” (p. 10). However, her continued desire for her readers to enjoy their unmastery clearly complicates the textbook model. She questions any straightforwardly triumphal understanding of a movement from incompetence (which allows one to enjoy difference) to competence (where the pay-off is recognition of the mistake). The lesson explores this case of misspelling to suggest the particular

value of being “on the edge of grammar,” being not so competent as to follow rules unconsciously but competent enough to acknowledge the way they produce a new pleasure in the form of error. “Spelling without yelling” suggests a form of grammaticalness that might not be hidebound by authoritative structures. In this context of discovery in the *First Reader*, it also alerts us to the way that linguistic play depends on learning a rule in order to understand what strict adherence to it forces us to give up and then disobediently—indeed childishly—refusing to do so.

Reading childishly, for Stein, is an act of queer refusal. Her *First Reader* presents a “successful” reading practice that proves indistinguishable from conventional failure. By all conventional accounts the book itself was a clear failure; deemed unsuitable for children and ignored by adults, its first, posthumous editions were also its last. Furthermore, failure and childishness queerly beget one another, as Halberstam suggests; if childishness means failure—failure to develop in particular directions, to abandon the pleasures of unfluency—the experience of failure itself brings us back into contact with childishness, “preserv[ing] some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood.” Stein herself understood failure as a queer, non-teleological pleasure when she famously wrote that “a real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.”⁷⁵

Just as Stein’s “juvenile for adults” veers from the developmental project of the conventional reading textbook, the turn away from critique encourages us to “unlearn the deep-seated protocols of our profession.”⁷⁶ Since Sedgwick’s queer articulation of the reparative in the mid-late 1990s, a growing number of theorists have described reading practices that relinquish the role of the masterful scholar and risk appearing less vigilant and more enraptured, less competent and more ignorant, less decisive and more vulnerable. What these theorists risk,

among other things, is childishness. The queerness of this risk, however, is not always acknowledged. Stein's *First Reader*, like her Baby Woojums persona, preserves the connection by insisting (to paraphrase Mavor) on the "ish" of childishness, an "ish" that keeps things queer. Stein's *First Reader* draws queer nourishment from the normative reader form while articulating a rather different kind of (non-)development. Like the reparative position, which remains "an always available state, not something one passes through," Stein's childishness is not a stage that must be left behind but a decidedly queer vantage point from which we might draw immense pleasure from our cultural objects.⁷⁷

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NOTES

¹ Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1878-1967) is known for the "here and now" school of children's writing, which sought to base stories in the everyday experience of life in the machine age. The stories collected in Mitchell's *Here and Now Story Book* (London: J. M. Dent, 1922) have contemporary urban settings and take inspiration from themes such as transport, industry, and immigration. Mitchell, who moved among the Greenwich Village avant garde from 1913 onward, provides an interesting early example of the influence of modernism on progressive

educational children's writing; see Joyce Antler, *Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of a Modern Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 202. Mitchell and Stein overlapped at Radcliffe College and took the same philosophy classes, including those taught by William James (Antler, p. 60).

² See Leonard S. Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 86.

³ Stein's influence on *Goodnight Moon* is noted in most studies of Brown's work and is discussed in Marcus's important 1992 biography, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon*. For an interesting discussion of Brown's work in relation to other modernist contexts—specifically the work of Henri Bergson and René Magritte—see Anna Panszczyk, “This Is Not About Picture Books: From ‘Here and Now’ to Surrealism in Margaret Wise Brown's *Little Fur Family* and *The Important Book*,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 36 (2011), 359-80.

⁴ Quoted in Barbara Bader, *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 215.

⁵ Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, *Studies in Major Literary Authors* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 196.

⁶ Quoted in Edward Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 721n2.

⁷ Gertrude Stein, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), dust jacket. Although *Three Plays* appeared together with the *First Reader* in its first British/Irish and American editions (published in 1946 and 1948 respectively), *Three Plays* was composed separately and was not submitted to Scott for publication alongside the *First Reader*.

This article will treat the *First Reader* (composed 1941) as a separate work, leaving aside *Three Plays* (composed 1943).

⁸ For works that consider, collectively, the relationships between children's culture and experimental art and literature, see Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Karin E. Westman, ed., "Children's Literature and Modernism," special issue, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 32 (2007); Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Margaret R. Higgonnet, "Modernism and Childhood: Violence and Renovation," *The Comparatist: Journal of the Southern Comparative Literature Association*, 33 (2009), 86-108; Nathalie op de Beeck, *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Marilyn Strasser Olson, *Children's Culture and the Avant-Garde: Painting in Paris, 1890-1915* (New York: Routledge, 2013). A number of these works attempt to address Jacqueline Rose's claim in her influential 1984 psychoanalytic study of children's literature that there is a "resistance to modernism in children's writing"—a claim that Rose herself complicates by suggesting that "childhood and modernism have some *necessary* relation"; see Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 142.

⁹ For important exceptions to the critical neglect of the *First Reader*, see Barbara Will, "'And Then One Day There Was a War': Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War II," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 32 (2007), 340-53; and Dana Cairns Watson, "Building a Better Reader: *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays*," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 35 (2011), 245-66. For a thoughtful analysis of the equally neglected *To Do*, see

Jacquelyn Ardam, “‘Too Old For Children and Too Young for Grown-ups’: Gertrude Stein’s *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*,” *Modernism/modernity*, 18 (2011), 575-95.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51; and Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹¹ Gertrude Stein, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays* (Dublin: Maurice Fridberg, 1946), 8. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹² Watson, “Building a Better Reader,” 246. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37. Sedgwick’s first formulations of reparative reading began the year before, however, in a four-page introduction to “Queerer than Fiction,” a special issue of *Studies in the Novel*, 28, No. 3 (1996). Sedgwick’s essay was later reprinted with light revisions in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

¹⁴ For more on Klein’s formulation of the paranoid-schizoid position, depressive position, and reparative process, see R. D. Hinshelwood’s *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 156-66, 138-55, 412-16. See also Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1988).

¹⁵ Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 416.

¹⁶ Robyn Wiegman, “The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative Turn,” *Feminist Theory*, 15, No. 1 (2014), 7.

¹⁷ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," in "The Way We Read Now," special issue, *Representations*, ed. Best and Marcus, 108 (2009), 1-21.

¹⁸ In addition to the essays in Best and Marcus's 2009 special issue of *Representations*, see Jane Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16, No. 3 (2000), 7-17; Tim Dean, "Art as Symptom: Žižek and the Ethics of Psychoanalytic Criticism," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 32, No. 2 (2002), 20-41; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 225-48; Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13-38; Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 41 (2010), 371-91; and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Marcus, Love, and Best have recently edited another special issue around this topic: "Description Across Disciplines," *Representations*, 135 (2016). See also works that draw on Sedgwick's reparative to emphasize a particularly queer mode of non-symptomatic reading: Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Mark Wollaeger, "Rejected Review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*," accessed 28 October 2016,

http://www.academia.edu/25591749/Mark_Wollaegers_rejected_review_of_Rita_Felskis_The_Limits_of_Critique.

²⁰ Deborah P. Britzman, "Theory Kindergarten," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 122, 132. The title of Britzman's essay, "Theory Kindergarten," refers to a phrase from Sedgwick's essay on the "weak" affect theory of Silvan Tomkins, in which she associates the renunciation of paranoid criticism with a willingness to risk looking childishly ignorant: "You don't have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of [Tomkins's psychology]" (*Touching Feeling*, p. 94). Sedgwick permits her readers to (re)enter this kindergarten, which Britzman imagines as "a fun fair of experiments, thrilling surprises, mis-recognitions, near-missed encounters, and phantasies" (p. 123). Daniela Caselli offers a different reading of this passage in an article that considers the role of childhood in the recent turn towards affect. Caselli is critical of the way that affect theories, including Sedgwick's, invoke the child as a figure of "overcoming and healing," thereby closing down analysis in their turn away from critique; see Caselli, "Kindergarten Theory: Childhood, Affect, Critical Thought," *Feminist Theory*, 11 (2010), 246. Asking "why are these feral children apparently no longer intelligently critiquing and are instead falling on their prey in order to make mincemeat of it?," Caselli argues that Sedgwick positions her approach as "a passage from theory's infancy to its development" whereby critical theorists' "childish adherence to the principles of theory" are opposed to (affect) theory in its advanced, post-kindergarten, grown-up stage (p. 249).

²¹ Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

²² Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 3.

²³ Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, “Queer Moments: The Performative Temporalities of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” in *Regarding Sedgwick*, 43. For an influential queer work that calls for the destruction of the child as a rejection of the hetero-futurity it apparently emblemizes, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Halberstam’s book can be seen as the most direct example of a number of queer feminist studies that connect childishness and queerness by considering Sedgwick’s reparative in relation to questions of temporality in particular. For instance, while Halberstam engages with the back and forth of childishness in particular, Freeman focuses on Sedgwick’s reparative as a way of accessing a more general queer untimeliness, arguing that it “turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal” (p. xiii). Wiegman considers these works alongside Love’s *Feeling Backward* and Cvetkovich’s *Depression* as a “queer feminist archive” that connects queer temporalities to reparative reading practices (p. 6). Subsequent references to Halberstam will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁵ The key work on the queerness of children is Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), which considers both the queerness of the not-yet-straight child and the childishness of the queer adult. See also Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

²⁶ The image of the child in the process of learning to read is distinct from the feminist psychoanalytic consideration of Stein’s writing in terms of the pre-symbolic. Charles Bernstein

emphasizes this difference when he argues that Stein's poetry might be better termed "para- or post-symbolic"; see Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 145.

²⁷ Michael Davidson, "On Reading Stein," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Bernstein, *Poetics of the New* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 198; and Ulla E. Dydo, introduction to *A Stein Reader*, ed. Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 3.

²⁸ Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 270.

²⁹ Significantly, Meyer also writes that "ignorance, the *negative* way of understanding something by beginning with one's lack of knowledge and not from what one already knows, is often the best way to address Stein" (p. 138).

³⁰ Marilyn Strasser Olson, *Children's Culture and the Avant-Garde: Painting in Paris, 1890-1915* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

³¹ I am thinking, for instance, of the celebrations of authenticity, expressiveness, freedom, insight, and spontaneity often attached to the figure of the child in Dadaism and Surrealism.

³² Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 69.

Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³³ Addressing Stein's "cuteness," Sianne Ngai acknowledges the term's proximity to the grounds upon which Stein has been mocked; see Ngai "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (2005), 814. Ngai notes that our tendency as critics is "to overcorrect in this direction, refusing to acknowledge that there may in fact be something cute, or 'indecently "cute,"' about Stein's writing" (p. 815).

³⁴ Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

³⁵ Kenneth Burke, "The Impartial Essence," review of *Lectures in America*, by Stein, in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein: Responses in Arts and Letters*, ed. Kirk Curnutt (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 88; and Robert S. Warshow, "Gerty and the G.I.s," review of *Brewsie and Willie*, by Stein, in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, 141.

³⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, *"Favored Strangers": Gertrude Stein and Her Family* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), xii.

³⁷ Stein to Carl Van Vechten, Bilignin par Belley, Ain, 9 March 1941, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 708-09. The Woojums family comprised Stein as Baby Woojums, Alice B. Toklas as Mama, and Van Vechten as Papa. Fania Marinoff was also occasionally included in the family as Empress or Madame Woojums. "Woojum" also refers to an absinthe-based cocktail of Van Vechten's invention, and he used it as a general term of endearment. From the mid-1930s onwards, however, it became more exclusively reserved for this pseudo-normative "family"; see Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 255n2.

³⁸ Stein, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader*, 40; and Stein to Van Vechten, Bilignin par Belley, Ain, 10 December 1940, in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 691.

³⁹ Will, "'And Then One Day There Was a War,'" 347.

⁴⁰ Stanley W. Lindberg, introduction to *The Annotated McGuffey: Selections from the McGuffey Eclectic Readers, 1836-1920*, ed. Lindberg (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976), xvii.

⁴¹ Will, "'And Then One Day There Was a War,'" 347. Will argues that during World War II, Stein became interested in children as "victims, collaborators, and agents of resistance" as a way to explore "her own fraught and even contradictory personal and political tendencies" (p. 352).

- ⁴² William Holmes McGuffey, “Things to Remember,” in *The Annotated McGuffey*, 110.
- ⁴³ Dydo, introduction to *A Stein Reader*, 9.
- ⁴⁴ Dydo, headnote to “Practice of Oratory,” in *A Stein Reader*, 443.
- ⁴⁵ Sharon J. Kirsch considers the connections between Stein’s *How to Write* and Edwin A. Abbott’s *How to Write Clearly: Rules and Exercises on English Composition* (1876), a grammar text used at Harvard during the 1870s and 1880s, in “‘Suppose a grammar uses invention’: Gertrude Stein’s Theory of Rhetorical Grammar,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 38 (2008), 283-310. *Tender Buttons* is read alongside Girl Scout handbooks by Kathryn R. Kent in *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), and alongside domestic manuals in Margueritte S. Murphy’s “‘Familiar Strangers’: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*,” *Contemporary Literature*, 32 (1991), 383-402.
- ⁴⁶ Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 3.
- ⁴⁷ Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 109.
- ⁴⁸ McGuffey, *McGuffey’s First Eclectic Reader*, rev. ed. (New York: American Book Company, 1920), 8.
- ⁴⁹ Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” in *Lectures in America* (London: Virago Press, 1988), 213.
- ⁵⁰ Stein, *How to Write*, 129.
- ⁵¹ Favell Lee Mortimer, *Reading Without Tears: Or, A Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read*, pt. 1 (London: Hatchard, 1866), 176-77.
- ⁵² Stein, *How to Write*, 65, 64.
- ⁵³ Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 45.

⁵⁴ See Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 83-114; and Bernstein, *A Poetics*, 145.

⁵⁵ Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy*, 46.

⁵⁶ Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 221.

⁵⁷ Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," 221.

⁵⁸ Spahr, "Gertrude Stein and Disjunctive (Re)reading," in *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*, ed. David Galef (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 278.

⁵⁹ Spahr, "Gertrude Stein," 277.

⁶⁰ Stein, *The World is Round* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 45.

⁶¹ Stein, *How to Write*, 109.

⁶² Stein also produces this confusion in the example from "Sentences" quoted above.

⁶³ Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993), 219-20. Defenders of a generalist liberal arts education, Robert Hutchins (the University of Chicago's president) and Mortimer Adler (a law professor) founded the Great Books program in the 1930s. For a discussion of Stein's Chicago trip, her encounter with Hutchins and Adler, and the tensions between the avant garde and the institution of the university, see Liesl Olson, "'An invincible force meets an immovable object': Gertrude Stein Comes to Chicago," *Modernism/modernity*, 17 (2010), 331-61.

⁶⁴ Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 219.

⁶⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶⁶ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 138, 150.

⁶⁷ Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America*, 166.

⁶⁸ Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 294.

⁶⁹ Nancy Bombaci, "Performing Mindblindness: Gertrude Stein's Autistic Ethos of Modernism," *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21 (2012), 145.

⁷⁰ Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 10-11.

⁷¹ Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 104.

⁷² Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 105.

⁷³ Critics have normally focused on the question of gender identity through the character of Rose in *The World is Round*. See, for instance, Linda S. Watts, "Twice Upon A Time: Back Talk, Spinsters, and Re-Verse-als in Gertrude Stein's *The World Is Round*," *Women and Language*, 16, No. 1 (1993), 53-57.

⁷⁴ Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 39.

⁷⁵ Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 175.

⁷⁶ Wollaeger, "Rejected Review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*."

⁷⁷ Juliet Mitchell, headnote to "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States (1935)," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Mitchell (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 116.