Looking for the One Who Looks Like Some One: The Unmarked Subject(s) in Gertrude Stein's A Play Called Not and Now

Julia Fawcett

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Looking for the One Who Looks Like Some One: The Unmarked Subject(s) in Gertrude Stein’s *A Play Called Not and Now*  

JULIA FAWCETT  

For all of her forays into playwriting and for all of her influence on later dramatists, Gertrude Stein was a notoriously nervous theatregoer. In her 1935 essay “Plays,” Stein attributes a large part of this nervousness to her suspicion that performance reduces complex characters to cardboard cut-outs, that the stage’s emphasis on surface, on spectacle, and on stock roles limits its capacity for depth.

But if performance is the stuff that dreams (or cardboard cut-outs) are made on, performance is also made of shadows. The theatre draws us in precisely by shutting us out, as we crane our necks and strain our eyes trying to glimpse the unseen depths that produce the seen surfaces, trying to grasp (if only for an instant) the forms that lurk just outside the circle of the spotlight, just behind the swish of the curtain, just beyond our reach. No one understood this interplay between what the theatre makes visible and what it conceals better than Gertrude Stein. Stein’s 1936 play, *A Play Called Not and Now*, is often regarded as one of her most virulent attacks on the theatre’s superficiality, but a closer look reveals a work haunted by subjects – both grammatical subjects and human subjects – that declare themselves, paradoxically, by disappearing.

The most insistent example is the disappearing subject of the verb “to look,” a verb that Stein employs “strenuously” (to echo Richard Bridgman’s polite disdain) in a play that looks at several characters who look like celebrities as they stand around looking at each other. Throughout *Not and Now*, in sentences such as “The one who looks like Dashiell Hammett looks at the one that looks like Picasso,” “look” serves as both an action verb and a being verb, and these multiple
grammatical functions imply multiple lookers – not all of them named (423). In a phrase like “Dashiell Hammett looks at Picasso” ("looks" as an action verb), for instance, “Dashiell Hammett” is the spectator and the subject of the sentence, and “Picasso” is the spectacle, the object of “Dashiell Hammett’s” gaze. But in “Dashiell Hammett looks like Picasso,” ("looks" as a being verb), “Dashiell Hammett” is the subject of the sentence, but the action of looking is being performed by another actor (or rather another looker), who is able to see both the one called Dashiell Hammett and the one called Picasso and notice that they do, indeed, look like each other. This looker’s presence is implied by the grammatical peculiarities of the verb “to look,” although, significantly, the looker is never named by the sentence’s nouns. Like an invisibility cloak in a children’s fairy tale, Stein’s grammar renders her subject always already disappeared: clearly present, but impossible to see or to describe.

For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to this looker throughout as “some one,” co-opting a portmanteau pronoun that Stein herself employs in Not and Now. But I want to emphasize that we should not think of this some one as a noun identifiable by kind, gender, or even number. Rather, as the space between “some” and “one” reminds us, the action of looking implied in the sentence may be an action performed by a group or an individual, as well as by a male or a female, a person or a thing (or even, given the presentation of landscape as subject in Stein’s landscape plays, by a place). The irreducibility of this some one to a nameable and containable and self-contained noun is precisely the point, for it is only through this some one’s unarticulated but undeniable existence that Stein reconciles a desire for fame with a desire for freedom, an intense yearning to speak as a subject with an intense anxiety that such self-expression might leave her vulnerable to the definitions and the appropriations of those who hear her. I want to suggest, in other words, that we might think of this “some one” as an authorial presence – but in doing so we must be careful not to attach this diffuse presence to a definite identity or to the name or to the biography of Gertrude Stein. Indeed, it is this some one’s complexity and irreducibility that allows Stein to move beyond her critique of identity and explore its possibilities and that allows Not and Now to move beyond the theatre’s superficiality and remind us of its inner depths. Articulate (it is this some one, after all, who tells us who each one looks like) but unarticulated, undeniable but invisible, this some one looks but is never looked at. As such, he or she (or it or they) escapes the theatrical personifications that made Stein so nervous and transforms A Play Called Not and Now from a virulent attack on the theatre to a celebration of its most profound – and its most under-appreciated – dimensions.
THE PROBLEMS WITH “PLAYS”

Much recent scholarship on Stein has focused on her use of the term “plays” to describe works that – with a few exceptions – remain unstaged and ostensibly unstageable. Nicholas Salvato questions the use of the phrase “closet drama,” as he argues that Stein refers to the conventions of the theatre even as she deliberately “queers” them, issuing an implicit challenge to her future readers: “Stage this” (“Gertrude Stein” 40). Sarah Balkin, similarly, insists on the unique temporality that depends on an identification of Stein’s plays as performances even as she analyses Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights in terms of its resemblance to Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts, a novel about a play. Such arguments reveal a hesitation among critics to accept Stein’s label “plays” without qualifications. Whether they interpret her term sincerely (Marc Robinson, for instance, regards Stein as the mother of American avant-garde drama) or ironically (Martin Puchner claims that the plays “actively resist being staged and coopt the world of the theater” [101]), most assume that Stein’s word is meant as a critique of the theatre rather than as a sincere engagement with its conventions.

Not and Now, as it is often interpreted, stands as an important example for the anti-theatricalist argument and a cog in the wheels of the pro-theatricalists. Written at the height of the literary celebrity Stein had achieved with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) and Lectures in America (1934–35), the play deals explicitly with the questions of identity and fame that Stein mulls over in several works from the 1930s and 1940s. It was during this time that Stein began to distinguish between the works she composed “for herself” and those she composed “for strangers.”

Ulla E. Dydo has referred to these latter as Stein’s “public works” (5) – those plays and novels, like Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights (1938) and The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, that Stein marketed to a public audience and that she composed (in deference to this audience) in a more conventional language than that of some of her earlier literary experiments. Dydo portrays these later works as Stein’s admissions of defeat in her struggle to express entity rather than identity, singularity rather than convention. Several critics have discovered in Not and Now evidence for Stein’s resentment at this enforced surrender, and even those who disagree with Puchner’s view that Stein’s plays are inherently anti-theatrical tend to read the work as an outright condemnation of theatricality. Salvato, for instance, describes the world of Not and Now as “a version of the hell” to which Stein damns her most soul-less dramatic character, Doctor Faustus (“Queer Theaters” 159).

Underlying these readings are vestiges of an anti-theatrical prejudice that associates theatricality with superficiality and publicity with a lost
sense of self. In recent years, however, theorists within the field of performance studies have begun to contest the anti-theatrical prejudice, illuminating the stage not as a space where artificial identities or conservative social ideologies are confirmed or magnified but rather as a tool that has great revolutionary and political power. In the wake of these theories, rethinking Stein’s representation of visibility and theatricality in *A Play Called Not and Now* is a necessary first step to rethinking Stein’s representation of visibility and theatricality in any of the works she called “plays,” as well as an important basis for re-examining the aims of what Dydo describes as Stein’s “public works” (5).

**NOMINAL SELVES AND VOCALIZED SELVES: STEIN’S AUTHORIAL PRESENCE**

The mistakes that former critics have committed in interpreting *Not and Now* as anti-theatrical have arisen from their tendency to begin with the play’s nouns (in particular, the character names) and read backwards. This temptation is understandable, given the uncharacteristically overt *dramatis personae* that launches the play:

**CHARACTERS**

A man who looks like Dashiell Hammett
A man who looks like Picasso
A man who looks like Charlie Chaplin
A man who looks like Lord Berners
and a man who looks like David Green

**WOMEN**

A woman who looks like Anita Loos
A woman who looks like Gertrude Atherton
A woman who looks like Lady Diana Grey
A woman who looks like Katharine Cornell
A woman who looks like Daisy Fellowes
A woman who looks like Mrs. Andrew Greene

These are the characters and this is what they do.
A man who looks like Doctor Gidon and some one who looks like each one of the other characters. The play will now begin. (422)

Stein populates *Not and Now* with a number of personae who “look like” the celebrities to whom her new-found fame as a writer and intellectual had introduced her: the writers Anita Loos and Dashiell Hammett and the silent film star Charlie Chaplin, whom she had met upon her arrival in Hollywood; the Broadway actress Katherine Cornell; the composer and eccentric nobleman Lord Berners; and Stein’s long-time friend Pablo
Picasso, whose revolutionary painting style was just beginning to gain an international following.

The recognizability of these names in the midst of an otherwise unrecognizable form has drawn most critics into the trap of interpreting these nouns as the play’s subjects and the verb “to look” that consistently precedes them as indicating Stein’s critique of the subjects’ celebrity. In her exploration of Stein’s metadrama, Jane Palatini Bowers offers the most complete analysis of the play and one that reverberates, largely unchallenged, in the work of later critics.11 “Not and Now was inspired by a cocktail party given in Stein’s honor two years earlier in Hollywood,” Bowers explains.

Attended by movie stars and other luminaries, the party had crystallized Stein’s worries about the transformation she was undergoing from a private to a public self. From observing the other celebrities, she had determined that there was an enormous gap between the projected self and the self hidden from view. Though the public self bears the same name and physical characteristics, she is not the private self, only a reasonable facsimile. So, too, the characters in a play may resemble or represent real people, but they are not before us as real people. Stein makes her point immediately clear in her character list (87).

Bowers indicates Stein’s frustration with names as superficial categorizations, even as she perpetuates these superficial categorizations by allowing the reputations of the names’ referents to overshadow her analysis of the names’ use within the play. In relying on the “projected self,” in other words, Bowers overlooks the “self hidden from view.”

But the list of _dramatis personae_, like the play it introduces, constantly alludes to, without naming, this self (or these selves) hidden from view, insisting on its presence while withholding its description. Bowers and the critics who have followed her assume that the play contains twelve characters that correspond to the twelve names articulated in the _dramatis personae_: five personae who look like “Characters,” six personae who look like “Women,” and another who seems to belong to neither category but who “looks like Doctor Gidon” and who, like those names listed under “Characters,” is referred to here and throughout the play using masculine pronouns. A closer look, however, complicates this head count — for what are we to make of the phrase that follows “[a] man who looks like Doctor Gidon” and implies the existence of “some one who looks like each one of the other characters”? Is this phrase merely a reiteration of the _dramatis personae_, a shorthand for a revised list that includes the one who looks like Doctor Gidon as well as all the “other characters” listed previously? Or is this “some one” an additional character or additional characters, unnamed and unfit for either of the two categories given of “Characters” and “Women”?"
Like the play’s repeated use of the verb “to look,” this phrase implies the existence of an undeniable presence pervading the play – the authorial presence that gazes at others while avoiding others’ gaze, that describes the events presented onstage while rendering himself or herself or themselves impossible to describe. Some “one” speaks and sighs and looks at things throughout the play, but the ambiguity of the word makes it difficult to determine whether the someone who speaks is the same one mentioned in these opening lines or merely a pronoun that stands as a substitute for any of the other characters in the play. Not only does “some one who looks like each one of the other characters” frustrate our attempts at identification based on some one’s gender, some one’s resemblance to the other characters, and some one’s words or actions, then; but we can’t even be sure whether this same one exists as a distinct character at all.

As in so many of her works (most famously The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas), then, in Not and Now, Stein problematizes the generic expectations of biography and autobiography: although the events of the play resemble the events of a Hollywood dinner party described by Stein in Everybody’s Autobiography and by Toklas in What Is Remembered, their treatment frustrates any attempt to identify them as strictly biographical. Indeed, Stein uses the play deliberately to deny such identification, to detach the authorial presence of this literary work from the authorial persona so well known in the wake of her literary celebrity. In making this claim, I do not mean to reiterate Roland Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author; rather, Stein seems both to allude to her autobiography in her works and at the same time to discourage us from allowing this autobiography to circumscribe or entrap the meanings that these works might produce. She invites us to define her biography according to the meanings she herself creates in her works rather than to imprison the meanings of her works according to the biography she cannot help. Not and Now works hard, in other words, to insist upon the presence of, while frustrating, all descriptions of the “self hidden from view,” in order to avoid its mutilation into the “projected self” that was, for Stein, shallow, incomplete, and untrue.

Stein had articulated her distinction between the projected self (Stein’s word, and the one I shall use throughout this essay, is “identity”) and the self hidden from view (or “entity”) in The Geographical History of America, which she completed a year before starting work on Not and Now. The entity is, for Stein, the true self. Because it does not conform to pre-existing names or categories (“woman,” “lesbian,” “American”), the entity remains individual, essential, and stable, despite inevitable fluctuations in the assumptions and prejudices of the era or society examining it. Though it is stable, however, the entity is not static; unique and highly complex, it consists of a number of seemingly contradictory aspects and
points of view, the way that Duchamp’s painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* represents its subject from a number of different angles simultaneously. We might think of the entity, in other words, as a verb: “[V]erbs can change to look like themselves or to look like something else, they are, so to speak on the move,” Stein writes in *Lectures in America*; “That is the reason any one can like what verbs can do” (212). The entity is a self based on becoming rather than on being, designated by thoughts and actions rather than simplistic labels or names.

If verbs describe entity, nouns denote identity, that projected self whose legibility depends on its conforming to predetermined and reductive categories. A noun may begin as descriptive, but it quickly becomes prescriptive, forcing an individual into a category that doesn’t quite fit. “A noun is a name of anything,” Stein explains in *Lectures in America*. “[W]hy after a thing is named write about it. A name is adequate or it is not. If it is adequate then why go on calling it, if it is not then calling it by its name does no good” (209–10). Nouns are uninteresting because, like identity, they rely on categorical resemblance rather than complex individuality: if an object (or a self) is variable or multi-layered, then a noun cannot describe it; if an object or a self never changes then there is no point in discussing it.

As Bowers has noted and as “Plays” confirms, Stein objected to the theatre because its economy of characterization – the “syncopated” relationship between the emotions of those standing on the stage and the emotions of those sitting in the auditorium – leaves little time for the complexities of entity and instead encourages characterizations based on superficial identity. “It is not possible in the theater to produce familiarity which is of the essence of acquaintance,” Stein complains in “Plays,” “because, in the first place when the actors are there they are there and they are there right away” (109). Encountering the characters in *medias res*, the spectator hasn’t time to appreciate their complexities or singularities; he must draw conclusions about them immediately based on their physical attributes or readily apparent traits. The conventional *dramatis personae* contributes to the syncopation in the theatre by listing the characters as names before the reader or spectator has had a chance to get to know them, before he or she has witnessed them committing any actions or thinking any thoughts.

Other works that Stein composed around this time indicate, as Bowers suggests, that Stein feared fame (including her own rising literary fame) as capable of transforming all the world into a stage – one upon which the celebrity would be regarded as an identity rather than an entity, a name rather than a person, a noun rather than a verb. “Alice B. Toklas” had become such a name after the success of *The Autobiography*, and in its sequel, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937), Stein portrays the character

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Alice Toklas as very much resenting that her name no longer belongs to her.\(^4\)

In the first place she did not want it to be Alice B. Toklas, if it has to be at all it should be Alice Toklas and in the French translation it was Alice Toklas in French it just could not be Alice B. Toklas but in America and in England too Alice B. Toklas was more than Alice Toklas. Alice Toklas never thought so and always said so. \((1)\)

Stein shows a similar concern with the noun “Gertrude Stein,” which greets her in large illuminated letters when her lecture tour takes her to Times Square:

\[\text{We saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting. Anybody saying how do you do to you and knowing your name may be upsetting but on the whole it is natural enough but to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but always it does give me a little shock of recognition and nonrecognition. It is one of the things most worrying on the subject of identity. (Everybody's Autobiography 180)}\]

To be famous was, for Stein, to be recognized, reproduced, and commodified as an identity rather than to express oneself as an entity.

Echoing this anxiety, A Play Called Not and Now portrays nouns as both inadequate and redundant. Nouns, Stein implies, neither guarantee nor express existence: “And the one who is like Dashiell Hammett what has he to say about money,” a voice asks towards the beginning of an extended discussion on that subject.

He says money I have money
He says money when I have no money.
He says when I have no money
He says money yes money. \((432)\)

“The one who is like Dashiell Hammett” may pronounce the word “money,” then, whether he possesses money or not. Like money itself, the name “money” is an empty signifier; it may refer to a meaning or to a value, but it has no meaning or value in and of itself.\(^5\)

The same might be said of the celebrated names that make up Stein’s \textit{dramatis personae}. Usually, the pronunciation of a name implies some level of familiarity between the person pronouncing the name and the person named, so that the name itself constitutes, for the person pronouncing it, a direct connection to the person that it signifies. But the names of
celebrities belong to everyone: like money, they are traded around and bandied about by those who have never come into direct contact with the object or person they supposedly signify. Through their endless reproduction and repetition, the names themselves have been commodified (hence our collective cultural clamour over famous autographs): they have acquired cultural capital in and of themselves and have been severed from the entities they are supposed to represent. By basing her analysis of the play on the public reputations that accompany the characters’ names rather than searching within the play for the entities it might engender, Bowers falls into the temptation that Stein both anticipates and warns against: she begins with the dramatis personae and allows the famous names it lists to dictate her reading; she interprets a name like “Alice B. Toklas” or “Dashiell Hammett” as somehow “more than” the entity that lies behind it, rather than the other way around.

But the notorious repetition of the verb “to look” in Not and Now invites another reading, one that reaches beyond the play’s nouns and its famous names to discover the selves hidden from view, the complex entities – like that unarticulated subject of “to look” – that lurk in the shadows of the play’s vibrant and all-too-often overlooked verbs. The field of performance studies – a field invented and perpetuated by a number of artist-theorists who count Stein among their most important influences – provides us with a vocabulary for such a reading.16 Indeed, those who study performance often distinguish themselves from those who study drama in terms that strongly recall Stein’s distinction between the theatre that made her nervous and the theatre that she strove to create: reacting against a scholarship that retains vestiges of anti-theatrical prejudice in its anxiety over the instability and superficiality of a play’s nouns, performance studies emphasizes the language of performance as a language of verbs. Ethno-linguist Richard Bauman defines performance, influentially, as “the actual execution of an action as opposed to its potential” – a definition that discovers the essence of performance in the transformation of a script into a show, a written word into an action, a noun into a verb.17 Joseph Roach defines even celebrity in these terms, describing it not as a static state of embodying a single personality but rather as “the play of suddenly reversible polarities” that depends at once on “self-expression and on self-erasure” (It 9).

Performance theorist Peggy Phelan is interested primarily in self-erasure: for her, the most significant verb within a performance is “to disappear.” In her 1993 book Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, Phelan echoes Stein’s frustration with the spectacle and visibility too often privileged on the stage. While identity politics promises the marginalized subject power if she can make herself visible, Phelan argues, this visibility actually leaves the subject vulnerable to the appropriations and

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misinterpretations of the dominant culture, a culture eager to “mark” with nouns the entity she tries to express as a verb. Phelan’s argument applies to performance the ground-breaking work of Laura Mulvey, who first articulated the problems of what was assumed to be the male gaze as perpetuated by the popular cinema (reaching its golden age around the time that Stein arrived in Hollywood). “The epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create distinctions and evaluations across two terms,” Phelan explains.

One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unremarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks. (5)

For Phelan, performance is not the vehicle for this marking but rather the antidote to it, for performance’s ephemerality, its reliance on the invisible as well as the visible, reminds the spectator constantly of the irreducibility and irreproducibility of the complex entity before him. “Performance is the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance,” Phelan asserts. “Poised forever at the threshold of the present, performance enacts the productive appeal of the nonreproductive” (4). Phelan defines performance, then, as “representation without reproduction,” noting that the moment that a performance is reproduced, recorded, copied, or even described – the moment it is transformed (in Bauman’s words) from an action back into its potential or (in Stein’s) from a verb back into a noun – it is no longer performance.18 The problems that both Stein and Phelan identify in performance stem not, then, from the conventions of performance itself but rather from our refusal to read performance as such – from our tendency to value what is made visible and nominal over what remains invisible, undefinable, unmarked.

In a recent article, Johanna Frank reiterates that Stein’s discomfort with the theatre arose from her discomfort with the embodiment that the theatre necessitated and with the assumptions that an audience might draw from such embodiment. She argues that Stein overcomes this discomfort by divorcing signifier from signified, employing words as sounds rather than as meaning. “Stein’s theatre is a body of sounds that reduces dramatic structure to the actor and the word and severs voices from conventional notions of character and action,” Frank writes. “As such, Stein’s drama embraces vocals as producing word-sounds that exceed the lexical meaning and the body” (505). But while Frank sees Stein’s theatre as
inimical to the grammatical structures and lexical significances of the words she employs, I see the disappearances so central to performance as arising directly from these words and from the precise ways in which Stein manipulates them. To read A Play Called Not and Now as a performance is to read it for the entities that move and groan just beneath its surfaces rather than to read it for the identities that it names; it is to search for its centre not in the proper nouns that identify its celebrities but rather in that uncertain “some one” lurking in the grammatical peculiarities of the insistent verb “to look.” Read in this way, Not and Now becomes, not an obstacle to, but rather a vehicle for appreciating the complex entity of the authorial presence, an entity that is indicated but not articulated in a play that insists on its existence while refusing to reduce it to a definite number, gender, or name.

THAT UNCERTAIN SOME ONE: STEIN’S DRAMATIS PERSONAE AND WHAT HAS BEEN OVERLOOKED

Realigning Not and Now so that the centre lies in its unnamed entities rather than in its named identities allows us to see the celebrated names that populate the dramatis personae and pop up throughout the rest of the play for what they are: that is, it allows us to see these names as a vocabulary not for revealing Stein’s critique of celebrity but rather for insulating the play’s authorial presence from such a reductive description. Perhaps the best example of this strategy is evident in Stein’s inclusion of “the one who looks like Picasso” in the play’s list of characters. Picasso’s is one of the names that complicates the identification of the play with the biographical events to which it supposedly refers; for the painter is not listed as a guest in Stein’s description of her Hollywood dinner party in Everybody’s Autobiography or in Toklas’s description in What is Remembered. It is possible that Stein included Picasso’s name in her dramatis personae to express her concern that his fame, which was growing rapidly in 1936, had interrupted the confidences they once shared. I want to suggest an alternative possibility, however: the possibility that Stein’s phrase, “the one who looks like Picasso,” refers not to a person but to a portrait – more specifically, to the famous portrait of Gertrude Stein that Picasso had completed in 1906. Crucially, the portrait is best known, not for accurately representing Gertrude Stein, but for erasing her.

The linguistic confusion between referring to a person as Picasso and referring to a painting as a Picasso was one that delighted Stein and that appears in a number of her works. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, for instance, the artist Marie Laurencin tells Stein, “I prefer portraits and that is of course quite natural, as I myself am a Clouet.” Stein agrees: “And it was perfectly true, she was a Clouet. She had the square
thin build of the medieval French women in the French primitives” (57). Similarly, in Everybody's Autobiography, Stein measures the changes in a friend's appearance by remarking, simply, “She looked like a Modigliani Brenner said and then in half a year longer she was a Rubens” (96).

Picasso's portrait of Stein had become iconic by this time, and the story of its composition – one of a few narrative threads running through The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas – may account for some portion of the attention that The Autobiography received. The fame that Stein laments in A Play Called Not and Now was, in other words, intimately bound up with Picasso's fame and with the fame of the portrait he painted of her. When Stein includes in her dramatis personae “the one that looks like Picasso,” she suggests the presence of “one that looks like a Picasso” – and not just any Picasso, but the one that looks like Gertrude Stein.

But of course, Picasso’s portrait was famous precisely because it didn’t look like Gertrude Stein. According to the story she relates in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein endured nearly eighty sittings in Picasso’s Paris studio during the fall and winter of 1905–6, while Picasso attempted painstakingly to reproduce her image on his canvas. Finally, Stein writes, “[S]pring was coming and the sittings were coming to an end. All of a sudden one day Picasso painted out the whole head. I can’t see you any longer when I look, he said irritably. And so the picture was left like that” (49). Picasso completed the portrait, according to Stein’s story, only after Stein had left Paris for the summer – leaving him free to compose her features not as they were but as he remembered them. Stein writes that, when those who knew her pointed out the portrait’s inaccuracies, Picasso replied simply, “Everybody says she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will” (12). Stein’s description confirms art historians’ identification of the portrait as the first in a series of paintings – culminating with the famed Demoiselles d'Avignon a few months later – in which Picasso makes explicit the modernist critique of the visual by replacing his subjects’ faces with primitive and disfiguring masks (see Lubars 57). Like all portraits, such remarks suggest, the portrait of Stein records not the way the subject looks but rather the way the artist looks at the subject – the distorting lenses of memory and desire through which the artist sees. This history allows another possible meaning for “the one who looks like Picasso” as the one who looks at things the way that Picasso looks at things, the one who sees the world through Picasso’s eyes.

Picasso’s portrait, then, marks its subject; it attaches the name of “Gertrude Stein” to a portrait made in Picasso’s image and designated as his property. Thus, it enacts the very appropriation of Stein’s identity that she so deplored in the theatre. Art historian Robert Lubars argues that
Picasso’s portrait responds to his own frustration at the way that Stein resisted existing categories of identity, at the impossibility of assigning her to a single noun. “The particular ‘ambivalence’ of Pablo’s Gertrude is . . . founded,” Lubar writes, “on the artist’s refusal to recognize the lesbian subject” (64). Later in the essay, he explains, “Gertrude Stein’s elaborate masquerade in her life and work represented . . . an abrogation and/or usurpation of patriarchal authority that Picasso had to disavow to complete her portrait” (73). Picasso’s literal effacement of the subject of his portrait, then, signals an anxious attempt to achieve mastery over her – to mark her as a mere reflection of his own identity. It is precisely this effacement, this appropriation, that Stein feared would follow any expression of herself as identity rather than as entity, as noun rather than as verb.

Stein critic Franziska Gygax has argued that Stein responded in kind, devoting two of her literary “portraits” – as well as numerous sections of her two “autobiographies” – to marking Picasso as her own literary creation (“Portrait”). We might see in A Play Called Not and Now (the title of which is echoed in the nouns and not nouns of Stein’s second portrait of Picasso19) a similar retaliation. But I think Not and Now represents a far more complicated response. For if Picasso’s portrait marks Gertrude Stein’s face as a representation of Pablo Picasso, Stein’s play, in turn, unmarks the play’s authorial presence by filling the place of biography with a portrait that doesn’t look like Gertrude Stein. Just as we cannot expect to discover what the person of “Gertrude Stein” looks like by gazing at Picasso’s portrait, Stein’s inclusion of “the one that looks like Picasso” reminds us, neither can we expect to discover what the name of “Gertrude Stein” means by gazing at her play.

Stein’s insistence on separating the play’s authorial presence from a definitive noun (like “Gertrude Stein”) becomes even more pointed as Not and Now continues and first one celebrity and then another refuses to pronounce “their” name. “Pronounce their name,” a voice demands as the scene opens.

If they look like them they do not pronounce their name, the one who looked like Picasso did not pronounce that name, the one who looked like Charlie Chaplin did not pronounce either the one or the other part of that name, the one who looked like Dashiell Hammett did not pronounce that name . . . (435)

As the voice continues in similar language, it suggests that the characters are not not pronouncing each of their own names, most of which are, in fact, pronounced by the end of the paragraph. Rather, the name that each character refuses to pronounce is the name or names that they all share: “their name.” It is, in other words, the name that might reveal the authorial presence calling them into being, the name that might describe and circumscribe the presence that has named them in the dramatis personae and that continues to name them throughout the play.
Julia Fawcett

It is possible to perceive, in this scene, an impulse to attach that name to the name on the play’s by-line – to the name, that is, of “Gertrude Stein” – but, deliberately and quite significantly, the play resists this impulse and warns us against identifying the play’s authorial presence too closely with the biography or the identity we associate with the play’s author. As the scene continues, each of the twelve characters listed in the dramatis personae struggles to pronounce “that name.” Crucially, none of them succeeds; but Gertrude Atherton – the only character who shares a portion of her name with Gertrude Stein – comes closest:

The one that looked like Doctor Gidon could have pronounced that name but he had not pronounced that name. The one who looked like David Greene could have pronounced the name to pronounce a name but all the same he did not pronounce that name. The one who looked like Mrs. Andrew Greene could not pronounce that name.

The one who looked like Anita Loos could not pronounce that name that is a question and the one who looked like Gertrude Atherton could pronounce that name that is not another question and the one who looked like Lady Diana Grey could not pronounce that name and the one who looked like Katherine Cornell could or could not pronounce that name and the one who looked like Daisy Fellowes could not pronounce that name.

So then each one who looked like that one did not pronounce that name. (435–36)

Unlike the paragraph that opens the scene, these paragraphs contain several people who may or may not be capable of “pronounc[ing] that name.” First, “the one that looked like Doctor Gidon” could have “but he had not.” Stein’s somewhat awkward verb tenses here state as a foregone conclusion the impossibility of the one that looked like Doctor Gidon’s pronouncing “that name”: he “could have” pronounced the name had he not already not pronounced it. The possibility that “the one who looked like David Greene” might pronounce that name lingers slightly longer; but again, Stein expresses his refusal in the past tense – something already firmly decided – and “all the same he did not pronounce that name.” (Interestingly, “the one that looked like Doctor Gidon” and “the one who looked like David Greene” have names that are less public than names like “Dashiell Hammett,” “Picasso,” “Charlie Chaplin,” or even “Lord Berners” – a fact that may account for their privileged position as those who could possibly have understood the private self or could have pronounced the unpronounceable name of the authorial presence.) “The one who looked like Katherine Cornell” comes even closer to pronouncing the name, but, before the possibility that she “could [pronounce that name]” is fully expressed, it is interrupted by its negation: “could or could not pronounce that name.”
In pronouncing her own name, however, “the one who looked like Gertrude Atherton” has already pronounced “either the one or the other part of that name” that gets caught in the throat of the one who looked like Charlie Chaplin. Here, then, we might sense a temptation to attach the voice of the unmarked “looker” of the play to the name of Gertrude Stein. Indeed, the possibility that “the one who looked like Gertrude Atherton could pronounce that name” lingers longest; expressed in the present tense, this possibility is not immediately dismissed but rather hovers like a held breath until the very last line of the scene: “So then each one who looked like that one did not pronounce that name.” By arresting Stein’s own name in mid-air, mid-articulation, the play wavers briefly between expressing identity and maintaining entity, between the self-as-noun and the self-as-verb.

But, tellingly, the one that looks like Gertrude Atherton, like each of the other characters who look like celebrities, ultimately refuses to pronounce “that name.” And, in disallowing the naming of the authorial presence, Stein frees that presence from the spectator’s gaze, from his identification of the play with the biography contained in the name “Gertrude Stein.” Unnamed, this presence defies description; undescribed, it escapes inscription. In Not and Now, then, Stein does not repeat but rather reverses the expressions of public selfhood that characterize her first so-called “public work,” The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Famously breaking the promise of its title, The Autobiography merely uses Toklas as a device to look at (rather than looking through) Stein; just as the person Gertrude Stein is the subject of its narrative, the name “Gertrude Stein” – repeated almost to absurdity – is the subject of many of its sentences. Not and Now, in contrast, pointedly avoids defining its author’s place or person or articulating its author’s name. Throughout the play, this central entity hovers just beyond the prescriptive categories of identity, omnipresent but unmarked.

LOOKING AT THE ONE THAT LOOKS: THE AUTHOR AS AUDIENCE

My purpose in this essay has been to reverse and assign new priorities to the conventional readings of Stein’s A Play Called Not and Now – readings that look outward from the play’s recognizable nouns; instead, I propose a reading that begins with Stein’s mysterious verb “to look” and moves inward to discover the unnamed entity or entities trembling just beneath the play’s surfaces. In doing so, I’ve attempted to follow Phelan’s dictum of valuing in performance what disappears as much as what is revealed and have read the names that launch other critics’ discussions of the play as mere costumes shielding the authorial presence from such reductive definitions, from the imprisonment of biography. In this light, Not and Now is not a critique but rather a celebration of performance as a medium that allows the performer to escape his or her biography and to
define himself or herself not by who she or he is but rather by who she or he performs – not as a noun but as a verb.

So far, then, I have limited my discussion to the lookers and to the looked at who appear (and disappear) on the stage. But, of course, in calling Not and Now a play, Stein implies the existence of another group of un-looked-at lookers never described precisely but nonetheless indispensable; that is, the amorphous and invisible spectators who gaze at Stein’s play from a darkened auditorium or who read it on the page. Stein enlists these spectators’ aid both implicitly – in calling her work a play – and explicitly – as a voice pleads, near the middle of the work, “Help them look like the one they look like” (427). Understanding Not and Now, as previous critics have done, as a “public work” that panders to, while disdaining, its public audience fails to account for the word “help” here and the implication that the audience serves not in opposition to but rather in collaboration with the authorial presence that directs them.

I emphasize this quotation in part to qualify my own argument, which might be misconstrued as describing an antagonistic relationship between audience and performer in Stein’s play. Indeed, in suggesting that the play maintains an authorial entity by refusing to describe that entity to the audience, I run the risk of perpetuating the very anti-theatricalist argument that I seem to reject, thereby implying that the presence of an audience makes unavoidable the pollution of entity into identity, of true self into projected self. This anti-theatricalist argument divides the spectator clearly from the spectacle and assumes a hierarchy that sets the spectator who describes and defines above the spectacle that is described and defined.

But evident in this plea to the audience to “help them” – and crucial, I think, to understanding Stein’s dramaturgy21 – is Stein’s refusal to relegate that amorphous authorial presence to the world onstage and to exclude it from the world of the audience. Throughout A Play Called Not and Now, Stein refuses to clarify whether the unmarked looker implied in her insistent verb watches the events and narrates the play as a character on the stage (a character who, like “all of them who looked like them,” as Stein writes, “looked around and as they looked around they saw everybody who was there” [424]), as a director or playwright waiting in the wings, or as an audience member gazing up from the auditorium in order to “help them look like the one they look like.” This confusion between what is onstage and what is not persists in Stein’s other plays, as stage directions blur into dialogue and the voices Stein imagines murmuring in the auditorium become indistinguishable from the voices murmuring onstage. It persists, too, in the essay “Plays,” where Stein discusses her reinvention of the theatre almost exclusively through her perspective as a member of the audience rather than from the viewpoint of a writer or director.22 Just as this amorphous “some one” cannot be defined by number or gender or identity,
and just as some one cannot be definitively described as person, place, or thing, so this some one can not be assigned a particular place in the theatre – backstage, onstage, or off. The undefinability of this some one subverts the boundary – and, with it, the hierarchy – that made Stein “so endlessly troubled about” the traditional theatre she deplored, a theatre in which “your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening” (93). *A Play Called Not and Now* thus maintains the integrity of the entity, not by denying or ignoring, but by pointedly evoking the live audience upon whom her performance depends.

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As the play opens, a voice announces, “The difference between not and now.” “That is what makes any one look like some one” (422). Bowers reads this statement as a dismissal of the theatre, a declaration of the impossibility of expressing entity in a medium that can only project identity. “*Not and Now* can end either with a narration of what *was* happening or as a wordless *tableau vivant* in which something *is* happening,” she writes. “Stein is unable in this play to synchronize the language of her play and its performance . . . The not and the now in *Not and Now* cannot be merged” (90). For Bowers, then, “now” is a word that signifies entity and its dependence on a continuous present; and “not” signifies identity, the self that the character looks like but that he or she is not. The title of Stein’s play, however, indicates that it is less about the difference between not and now than about the reconciliation of them: it is *A Play Called Not and Now*, after all, and not *A Play Called Not or Now*. Indeed, the expression of entity depends as much on “not” as it does on “now,” for entity – as performance studies reminds us – emerges in what is *not* fully visible, what is *not* fully articulated. It is precisely the not-ness of performance that makes it so profound: performance prevents its entities from becoming identities because for a moment – for now – it is visible; while, in the very next moment, it is not.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Joseph Roach, Marc Robinson, Sarah Novacich, and my anonymous reader for their generous help and advice on this paper.

2 The most extended analysis of the play as such is Bowers, discussed later in this essay; see also Bridgman 285; Salvato, “Queer Theatres” 159–60.

3 Bridgman discusses Stein’s repeated use of the verb to look as emphasizing “the disparity between the public and private selves” of the characters but complains that “the technique is so strenuously used . . . that the play as a whole is very dull” (285).
4 Stein’s refusal to identify her authorial persona as male or female insulates it from the sort of Butlerian gender trouble that several critics have associated with her “queerness” (by which they have meant both her lesbianism and the difficulty of fitting her work into established genres or categories). Marianne deKoven was the first to suggest a link between Stein’s resistance to the conventions of literary (and grammatical) form and her resistance to the conventions of gender identity (incorporating Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theories about queerness); see also Stimpson, who discusses the experimental elements of Stein’s writing as expressing (or failing to express) her sexuality. For more recent discussions of queerness in Stein, see Salvato, “Gertrude Stein”; “Queer Theaters”; Gygax, *Gender and Genre*, Taylor. Although I have benefited from these studies, I think that explaining Stein’s literary queerness in terms of her biographical identity reinforces precisely the sort of biographical determinism that she attempts to dissolve by unmarking the authorial persona of *Not and Now*.

5 “I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance,” Stein explains in “Plays” (122). She characterizes as “landscape plays” “all the plays that I have printed as Operas and Plays” (122) – a collection that includes *A Play Called Not and Now* – and notes, “The only one of course that has been played is Four Saints. In Four Saints I made the Saints the landscape” (128–29).

6 Robinson proposes an alternative history of the modern American theatre that begins with Stein and includes the often-neglected work of avant-garde artists such as Maria Irene Fornes and Richard Foreman. “Once Stein is acknowledged as a major figure in American drama’s adolescence . . .” he writes, “a world of drama comes into clearer focus. Much of the most penetrating recent work acquires a history, a context, whereas before it was considered merely a digression from the mainstream – something abnormal” (3); see also Ryan; Bay-Cheng.


8 The distinction Dydo makes between Stein’s earlier experimental works addressed to herself and to her close friends, and the later, more accessible works she composed for a public audience is a generally accepted one; most mark the turning point between the experimental and conventional works as the 1933 publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*; see also Mills 198. For a discussion of Stein’s reception as a celebrity in America, see Leick.

9 Bowers, too, though she insists on reading Stein’s plays as performances, nonetheless sees *Not and Now* as a rejection of the theatre; and even Robinson writes that in the play, “conventional definitions of character are . . . suspect,” though he concludes that certain aspects of the play “establish presence more forcefully than could any speech or stage business” (18).

10 Richard Schechner argues that “performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more ‘truthful,’ more ‘real,’ than ordinary experience” (xiv). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that in breaking down traditional boundaries between truth and artifice, performance studies also challenges the boundaries between (and the hierarchies of) traditional disciplines, which often regard the written word as superior to the spoken word:
The Unmarked Subject(s) in Gertrude Stein’s *A Play Called Not and Now*

Performance Studies . . . challenges aesthetic hierarchies and analyses how they are formed . . . [and] encompasses not only the most valorized, but also the least valued, cultural forms within these hierarchies . . . By theorizing embodiment, event, and agency in relation to live (and mediated) performance, Performance Studies can potentially offer something of a counterweight to the emphasis in Cultural Studies on literature and media, text as an extended metaphor for culture, and enrich the discussion of discourse, representation, the body (to be distinguished from embodiment), and identity” (43).

See also Jackson.

11 Robinson; Salvato, “Gertrude Stein”; “Queer Theaters”; Bridgman; see also Marranca, who describes the play’s central subjects as “characters who all look like famous personalities” (xiii).


13 In his 1968 essay, Barthes describes writing as “that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (221). But in evoking the events of her life constantly in her writings and by labelling many of her works explicitly as “autobiography,” Stein seems to insist on our recognition of her authorship – refusing to dissociate her works from her self but nonetheless urging us to read her life as created by her works, rather than vice versa.

14 In citing this passage as evidence for Stein’s anxieties about fame, I don’t mean to attribute this anxiety to the historical person Alice B. Toklas, only to the literary character Alice B. Toklas, a creation of Gertrude Stein. As autobiographical theorists argue (see, e.g., Smith) and as Stein’s facetious employment of the term “autobiography” implies, the events she narrates in *Everybody’s Autobiography* may or may not have occurred. But whether Stein’s description of the character Alice B. Toklas is or is not based on the person Alice B. Toklas, it is clear that the anxiety she attributes to Toklas is one that permeates her own work and might thus be posited as evidence of her own anxieties.

15 Bowers reads this scene quite differently, arguing that Stein draws a contrast between the substantiability of money as a physical object and the evanescence of language:

> Whenever the language of *Not and Now* encounters physical reality, language comes off as less powerful than that which can be seen . . . For example, in a meditation on money we learn that money is an object. It exists, occupies space [unlike language, which is] . . . “a barrier to knowledge” and “a source of confusion.” (89)

Bowers cites, in particular, the line “Money is there” as evidence that the play portrays money as a physical object, a thing that is undeniably “there.” But I see “there” as yet another empty signifier, particularly since in the play (much as in Stein’s famous description of her native Oakland), there isn’t really any there there (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 289). Is the play meant to be performed on a
stage or read in a library? Does it take place in Mrs. Ehrman’s living room or in Stein’s imagination? Concerned as she is with the dramatis personae, Stein never defines the play’s setting.

16 Robinson confirms that avant-garde dramatist Richard Foreman acknowledged Stein’s influence (3); other practitioners who have recently paid tribute to Stein include Robert Wilson, who directed Four Saints in Three Acts in 1996, and the Wooster Group, which premiered an adaptation of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, entitled House/Lights, in 1999.

17 Bauman’s definition serves as the entry under “performance” in The International Encyclopedia of Communications (3: 362–66); for critics who adopt this definition, see Carlson 5; Roach, Cities 3.

18 Significantly, Phelan applies this definition not only to plays or performance art but to any art work— a photograph, a film, a poster— which “becomes itself through disappearance” (146). It is possible to read Not and Now as a performance, then (despite its never having been performed during Stein’s lifetime), if we learn to value it in what disappears over what is exposed.

19 Stein opens the portrait with a meditation on “Napoleon,” followed by “Now. / Not now. / And Now. / Now” (“If I Told Him” 464). For a discussion of the portrait and its portrayal of Stein’s complex relationship with Picasso, see Gygax, “Portrait”; Haselstein 724.

20 For instance, consider the following pair of sentences: “At this show Gertrude Stein met George Antheil who asked to come to see her and when he came he brought with him Virgil Thomson. Gertrude Stein had not found George Antheil particularly interesting although she liked him, but Virgil Thomson she found very interesting although I did not like him” (Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 213). These sentences take Stein as their subject, including her full name even where it is not necessary and tacking Toklas’s subjectivity onto the end of the sentence as an afterthought (“although I did not like him”).

21 For a discussion of Stein’s interest in audience collaboration, see Chessman.

22 The indistinguishability of stage directions and dialogue is a common feature of Stein’s plays, as Puchner notes (101). In several plays, similarly, Stein leaves it ambiguous whether the people speaking are meant to be actors onstage or spectators watching from the auditorium; in Ladies Voices (1922), several voices seem to critique Stein’s work before commenting on each other’s appearance:

What are ladies voices.
Do you mean to believe me.
Have you caught the sun.
Dear me have you caught the sun. (556)

In “Plays,” Stein says her experiences as a reader and spectator were more influential than her experiences as a writer: “So then for me there was the reading of plays which was one thing and then there was the seeing of plays and of operas a great many of them which was another thing. Later on so very much later on there was for me the writing of plays which was one thing” (111).
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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on Gertrude Stein’s 1936 work *A Play Called Not and Now*, often regarded as Stein’s most virulent attack on the theatre and the theatre’s corruption of selves into simulacra, “entity” into “identity.” But if the play articulates Stein’s discomfort with how her rising literary fame complicated her expressions of entity, it also offers a solution to this discomfort within the very theatrical conventions it appears to critique. Employing the methodology of performance studies, which regards performance as a unique medium that, in the words of Peggy Phelan, “becomes itself through disappearance,” this essay locates the centre of the play in its verbs rather than in its nouns and in the authorial presence it refuses to describe rather than in the celebrities it names. The essay begins with a detailed analysis of Stein’s repetition of the verb “to look” throughout the play in order to re-examine the often debated question of what Stein meant when she called a work a play.

KEYWORDS: Gertrude Stein, *A Play Called Not and Now*, celebrity, autobiography, spectatorship, identity/entity, disappearance

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