

Article

Gertrude Stein and the Metaphysical Avant-Garde

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Abstract: When American metaphysical religion appears onstage, it most often manifests in the subject matter and dramaturgies of experimental theater. In the artistic ferment of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, theater-makers looked both to alternative dramaturgies and alternative religions to create radical works of political, social, and spiritual transformation. While the ritual experiments of European avant-garde artists like Artaud and Grotowski informed their work, American theater-makers also found inspiration in the dramas of Gertrude Stein, and many of these companies (the Living Theatre and the Wooster Group, most notably) either staged her work or claimed a direct influence (like Richard Foreman). Stein herself, though not a practitioner of metaphysical religion, spent formative years in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at Radcliffe under the tutelage of William James. Cambridge, at the turn of the twentieth century, was a hotbed of spiritualism, theosophy, alternative healing modalities, and James, in addition to running the psychology lab in which Stein studied, ran a multitude of investigations on extrasensory and paranormal phenomena. This article traces a web of associations connecting Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalism, and liberal Protestantism to Gertrude Stein and landscape dramaturgy to the midcentury avant-garde, the countercultural religious seeking of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Off-Off-Broadway movement.

Keywords: American avant-garde theater; Gertrude Stein; metaphysical religion

“Is life worth living? Yes, a thousand times yes when the world still holds such spirits as Prof. James”, wrote a 21-year-old Gertrude Stein in ardent acclamation of her mentor, the eminent American psychologist and philosopher William James (Ruddick 1990)¹. Stein’s exuberant tribute seems to have been a response to the eponymous question James posed in one of his most famous essays, his 1895 lecture “Is Life Worth Living?”, which dwelled not on the psychological concepts that Stein, a student at Radcliffe, studied in his classrooms and laboratories (the influence of which on her experimental prose style has been well-documented by critics and scholars). Rather, it presented thoughts on James’s other chief field of experimentation and study: religion. The lecture described a relationship between the spiritual and natural worlds, defining religion as belief “that the so-called order of nature that constitutes this world’s experience is only one portion of the total Universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world” which gives meaning to mundane reality (James 1895, p. 15). James argued for the power of “maybe” and the necessity of religious possibility, for a leap over the abyss towards which meaninglessness tempts in favor of an assent to the sacred, a yes to belief, a heroic burst of faith in the unseen order.

Whatever captivated Stein in James’s talk was not unusual in his writing. Before composing his foundational text on religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James rehearsed many of his ideas in the lecture hall and the lab. In doing so, he inevitably exposed his students to the religious ideas that influenced his own, chief among them the works of the minister, poet, and philosopher

¹ Quoted in Lisa Ruddick’s *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a key architect of Transcendentalism, a uniquely American philosophy that influenced many of the metaphysical religions to which James devoted years of research. Within these later generations of spiritual practices could be found the DNA of Emerson's gospel of radical individualism, esoteric correspondences, continual revelation, personal spiritual discovery, Romantic nature, salutary solitude, and language's creative force.

While Stein eventually moved away from the direct influence of James, she remained steeped in his language and ideas, and traces of his religious experiments, as well as of Emerson, continued to arise in her work². Stripping this language of its metaphysical overtones in favor of a deliberate vagueness, Stein could allude to these former meanings without directly referring to them (Poirier 1992). The result is that Gertrude Stein, despite her avowed secularism, is the foremost playwright of metaphysical America. And though Ulla Dydo, Marc Robinson, Joseph Cermatori, and Rebecca Kastleman, among others, have observed Stein's fascination with Catholicism and saints, less attention has been paid to metaphysical religion as a dimension of Stein's work or its ripple effect through the American avant-garde.

Stein's preoccupation with the workings of the mind, her embrace—knowingly or not—of a theory of correspondences to describe her personal metaphysics, and her attention to attention itself, to as Kate Davy put it, the “evolution of consciousness,” locate her squarely within the primary obsessions of American metaphysical religion (Davy 1978, p. 124). Stein's use of the word “meditation” to describe her writing process reflects the larger late-nineteenth century cultural fascination with contemplative practice and “mental hygiene.” Her turn to landscapes and nature stems in part from the influence of Transcendentalist thinkers. And her elevation of the artistic masterpiece as humanity's highest goal and achievement represents Stein's revision of Emersonian ideals. Metaphysical resonances persist in Stein's theories, in her plays, and in her dramaturgy, even when her work is later borrowed and remade by artists of the burgeoning American avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s.

What follows here are the seeds of an intellectual genealogy of the American avant-garde with particular attention paid to Stein and the shifting religious landscapes of metaphysical religion. As Sarah Bay-Cheng suggested: “the history of the avant-garde is perhaps best evaluated as an intricate web of overlapping and conflated influences, Stein being only one of them” (Bay-Cheng 2004, p. 119). Presented here are some of the primary strands of that web, or to offer another metaphor, a constellation of ideas that suggest a larger picture rather than propose a string of direct causal relationships. Within this constellation, Stein proves to be not only a major influence on the generations of American avant-garde that follow her, but she also provides a link to an earlier generation of metaphysical thought in America. By tracing Gertrude Stein's relationship to metaphysical religion, we can also begin to trace how theatrical alternatives to a dominant strain of realistic drama have grown up side by side with spiritual alternatives to the dominant faiths of evangelical and denominational religion. Stein's language echoes metaphysical discourse by retaining fragments of something beyond the material, hovering between belief and unbelief, haunted, teasing, suggesting.

1. Metaphysical Religion

In the ever-unfolding story of religiously-inflected theater created for secular American stages, scholarly narratives may neglect to focus on the presence of metaphysical religion. Scholars and

² In *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, Lisa Ruddick argues that Stein's radical innovations encode her process of self-definition against James and the entire nineteenth century, which he represented. In *Poetry and Pragmatism*, an exploration of the thematic and syntactic links between Emerson and a handful of modern American writers—including Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Stein—Richard Poirier, calls William James the “point of transmission” linking Emerson to the rest, and proposes that all, in spite of their “democratic impulse”, share “a recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness”. Poirier casts Emerson as a kind of proto-postmodern, citing Emerson's recognition that “every text is a reconstruction of some previous texts” and that language both “creates structures we can believe in” while simultaneously creating “gaps in those structures, gaps in what it only pretends to have settled”. This skepticism particularly manifests in “matters of belief”. Poirier traces this skepticism through Emerson, James, and Stein, and shows how Emerson's progeny continually revised and reformed his ideas, each through his or her own unique genius.

critics often limit discussions of religion on secular stages to works that appear overtly in dialogue with a religious context: i.e., *Jesus Christ Superstar*, to offer an example from some of the decades mentioned here, or Lucas Hnath's *The Christians* and Joshua Harmon's *Bad Jews*, as examples from our more recent moment. Additionally, scholarship tends to focus on works in dialogue with various Christian traditions as well as on Judaism to a lesser degree. But as Catherine Albanese has argued, metaphysical religion represents a significant vein of spiritual practice within the story of American religion. A notable exception in this body of scholarship is Edmund Langan's *The Occult Revival and Its Theatrical Impulses* (2014), which explores drama and performance in dialogue with a variety of traditions that fall under the larger banner of the term "metaphysical". Langan's American examples, however, were primarily performed within ritual contexts and utopian spiritual communities rather than for heterogeneous audiences on secular stages. By unearthing metaphysical resonances in Stein's work and the work of her later admirers, metaphysical religion finds a more central place in the larger story of religion on professional stages.

Defining metaphysical religion requires its own complicated web of associations. In her 2001 book *The Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Catherine Albanese offered a complimentary narrative to the evangelical and denominational stories of American religion by tracing a third strand—a "combinative" religious practice she called "metaphysical" (Albanese 2007, p. 21). In 2005, Leigh Eric Schmidt argued in *Restless Souls* that those who today identify as "spiritual but not religious" come from a documentable tradition dating to the nineteenth century's shift towards religious liberalism—a shift that began ostensibly with the Transcendentalists. Both show how this non-creedal spirituality espoused religious ecumenism, inclusivity, and individual mystical access to the divine. Whether labeled "mysticism," "metaphysical religion," or "spirituality," this American religious tradition is "excitedly eclectic, mystically yearning, perennially cosmopolitan" and offers a liberal, progressive, left-leaning spiritual counterweight to orthodox religions and the Christian Right (Schmidt 2005, p. 6).

While Schmidt focused on the shift towards liberalism in the nineteenth century, Albanese's story of metaphysical religion in America began in the Hermetic and vernacular magical traditions of Europe and traced its reformulation in the New World after contact with African and Indigenous traditions. She followed the word "metaphysics" from a nineteenth-century "catholicity of mind and spirit signified, especially, by an openness to Asia and an embrace of South and East Asian religious ideas and practices" through the twentieth-century shift towards "a self-styled name for Americans who understood themselves as seekers on a 'spiritual' path" (Albanese 2007, p. 12). Schmidt focused on the trajectory of the American religious "seeker" or "mystic," from the Transcendentalists along the open road of Whitman through what is often referred to today as "self-care"—cultivating a calm, centered inner life within the stresses of the workaday world. Beginning with Emersonian individualism and Thoreauvian solitude, Schmidt forged a path through the search for a universal mystical religion and the burgeoning vogue for meditation.

To make Stein's metaphysical resonances legible requires a return to Albanese's definition of metaphysical religion, which, above all, is concerned with "mind and its powers". Albanese explains, "Mind, in short, is about consciousness and all that derives from and returns to it—with emphasis ever on the mental awareness by which humans interact with their environments." Mind covers a range of experiences and expressions: "poetry and intuition"; so-called "psychic" activities like "clairvoyance and telepathy"; the experience of "altered states of attention such as trance and meditation"; mind even "translates to action and material transformation". The metaphysics of mind forms a nexus between interiority and the physical world that ground metaphysical religion. In the centuries of history Albanese traverses, this concept of mind remains continually at the center, in practices as varied as mental healing, meditation, and channeling (ibid, p. 13).

Albanese also points to the ways in which American metaphysical religion recapitulates the "ancient cosmological theory of correspondences between worlds" and posits an equivalence between the macrocosmic "world of divinity, Nature, or the metaphysically favored eternal or collective Mind" and the microcosmic "human (and sometimes natural) world and/or mind". Macrocosm and

microcosm “could be described as made of the same stuff”, like each other “in all things except scale” (13–14). Albanese’s reconstruction of the long lineage of these correspondences shows how each proffered a unique but analogous set of terminology to describe this macro/microcosmic relationship, from Transcendentalism to Christian Science to New Age philosophy.

The relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm, meditation, the observance of nature, and the workings of the mind all figured heavily into metaphysical discourses in which William James participated as well as in the general spiritual tenor of late-nineteenth century America into which Stein was born and educated. As Ulla Dydo pointed out, more knowledge of Cambridge in the 1890s would help illuminate the intellectual atmosphere of Stein’s formative years and offer new ways of thinking about her work (Dydo 2003).

2. Meditation and the Late-Nineteenth Century Metaphysical Ferment

By the nineteenth century’s last decade, when the college-age Stein was engaged in her studies, Cambridge, Massachusetts had long been an epicenter of American metaphysical thought. In the decades prior to James’s tenure there, Harvard was home to the birth of Transcendentalism, which heralded a new non-doctrinal spirituality. Led, in effect, by Emerson, the Transcendentalists looked for inspiration to German Romanticism; the relatively new field of Biblical criticism, which engendered a newfound religious skepticism; and the theosophy of seventeenth-century Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. If the previous generation “beheld God and nature face to face” and “we through their eyes”, Emerson wrote, “why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Emerson 2004a, p. 9). True to the democratic spirit of American religion, such individual revelation was available to all, and Emerson, and his friend Henry David Thoreau, sought it through solitary communion with nature.

It was Emerson and the mystical writings of Swedenborg that, in turn, served as foundational ideas in William James’s work on religion (E. Taylor 2011)³. At Harvard, James’s capacious intellect produced an extensive body of work covering psychology, religion, and pragmatism, a school of philosophy he helped found. After initially veering into medicine, James sought his entire life to bring science and spirit into harmony. In the 1880s, inspired by the wellspring of new religious activity flowing around him, James sought scientific evidence for psychic and religious phenomena (ibid, p. 22–23)⁴. His better-known laboratory work on attention, states of consciousness, and the psycho-physical connection—the influence of which on Stein’s writing has been explored at length—unfolded alongside his work on witchcraft, trances, mesmerism, mystical encounters, and the newly fashionable practice of meditation⁵.

James’s fascination with meditation reflected a wider trend in late-nineteenth century American religious liberalism towards mental healing, mesmerism, and silent, solitary contemplation. As Schmidt describes it: “the burst of interest in meditation involved a peculiarly American conversation among Transcendentalists, liberal Protestants, Reform Jews, Vedantists, Buddhists, and mind-cure

³ Eugene Taylor, a William James scholar and former professor of psychology at Harvard, considered “Swedenborg and Emerson” to be the “primary philosophical frame of reference for understanding James”. For his social and political context, Taylor placed James in the “American utopian socialism of the 1840s, to which James was a direct heir through Henry James, Sr. and Emerson” (E. Taylor 2011, pp. 182–83).

⁴ James, primed for belief by his upbringing, never desired to empirically “explain away” such phenomena but rather to redefine the psychological and religious expanses of human experience. In 1885, James built his own temple for the systematic exploration and documentation of spiritual phenomena in co-founding the American Society of Psychical Research. Overseen by Harvard luminaries, committees including Experimental Psychology, Thought-Transference, Apparitions and Hallucinations, Mediumship, and Hypnotism reveal the late-nineteenth century zeal for empiricism and the desire to scientifically investigate what was happening in metaphysical discourse (E. Taylor 2011, pp. 22–23).

⁵ His influences from the metaphysical community are too many to name here, but Jamesian scholarship, Eugene Taylor’s in particular, show that James readily defended vernacular metaphysics (he testified on behalf of mind-curers to the Massachusetts State House), and was himself well-versed in principles of New Thought and the therapeutic dimensions of positive thinking and meditation.

metaphysicians" (2005, p. 17)⁶. James, for his part, published his 1899 essay "The Gospel of Relaxation", in which he recommended physical activity and mental repose as antidotes to the stresses produced by the excitable American character.

The eclectic spiritual paths that came together to form this turn of the century fascination with meditation tell us that Stein's use of the word was plucked partially from her time experimenting in the psychology lab and partially from the spiritually-charged zeitgeist in which she spent some of her early years. They also remind us that the religious eclecticism we associate with the 1960s and 1970s counterculture—a religious eclecticism we also find in American avant-garde artists influenced by Stein, such as the Living Theatre and Richard Foreman—stretches further back to the strain of metaphysics that permeated Stein's world, thought, and the theatrical work to which we now turn.

3. Meditation and Landscape Dramaturgy

Much has been written about Stein's concept of landscape both as it manifests in her writing and how that has been translated to the stage. In her essay "Plays", Stein described a creeping anxiety that overcame her at the theater as the narrative unfolding before her outpaced her emotional involvement. The story on stage and her inner response were out of step, causing what she termed "syncopation", an uncomfortable feeling she then sought to remedy. She thought if she could remove narrative, remove causality, and therefore remove time from on-stage action, such feelings of syncopation would end. To do this, Stein moved away from a linearly unfolding narrative to juxtaposing images, objects, and words in space, placed as if in a landscape.

Looking at natural landscapes transformed her way of imagining her writing. In an oft-quoted excerpt from *Plays*, Stein captures the sensation of her eyes gliding across a vista, marking one thing in relation to another: "the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail". "And of that relation", Stein writes, "I wanted to make a play" (Stein 1967, p. 77). Narrative and incident, the time-bound dimensions of more traditional theater, cool into static images or fragment into other "objects" placed in space. "A landscape does not move", Stein wrote, "nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there" (ibid, p. 80).

To observe the "things that were there", Stein engaged in what she called "meditation". Much like the mental concentration or contemplative devotion implicated in the religious sense of the word, Stein used the term meditation to indicate the "process of realizing perception". Ulla Dydo went so far as to call this process of "becoming conscious" a "sacramental act", As Dydo explains: "To meditate, for Stein, meant to concentrate all her attention on what she saw immediately before her" (Dydo 1988, p. 47). Stein's meditation was inextricably linked to the phenomenology of gazing, often at natural landscapes, and capturing what she saw in language.

⁶ When Americans began to encounter Asian traditions, meditation and yoga were seen as paths to mental clarity and concentration, tonics against an increasingly anxious and fast-paced culture. Vedantist Swami Vivekenanda and the Sinhalese Buddhist monk Anagarika Dharmapala, in particular, traveled widely on the American lecture circuit, promoting Hindu and Buddhist spiritual techniques for mental focus and well-being. Schmidt also locates a home-grown strand of meditation practice in the "optimistic gospel of mental healing and positive thinking" known as "New Thought" (Schmidt 2005, p. 17). Horatio Dresser, James's friend and colleague at Harvard, and Ralph Waldo Trine, whose best-seller *In Tune With the Infinite* James read and quoted, were both star players in the New Thought movement, and James observed in the *Varieties* that the current vogue for contemplative practice stemmed not from evangelical Protestant devotional prayer but from "our mind-curiers," who had "reintroduce[d] methodical meditation into our religious life" (p. 147). Trine and another fellow New Thought devotee, Henry Wood, both recommended "a daily practice of meditation and concentration, performed in solitude and silence in a seated restful posture" to quiet a wandering mind, sharpen concentration, and draw into life the abundant "divine inflow" (p. 147). Annie Besant, a second-generation leader of the Theosophical Society, wrote extensively on meditation's role in the quest for divine knowledge. Heavily influenced by some Buddhist and Hindu devotional practices, Besant championed mental "one-pointedness" or *samadhi*, a state of intense meditative focus that lead to transcendent consciousness. The difficulties of this practice are made clear in Besant's counsel: "When the mind loses hold of its object, whether devotional or intellectual—as it will do, time after time—it must be brought back, and again directed to the object" (pp. 108–9).

But as Elinor Fuchs observed, it is ultimately unclear when Stein talked about plays as landscapes whether she meant a way of seeing or thing to be seen—the inner world of perception or the outer one of material reality. Fuchs wrote that Stein uses the term landscape to describe “a phenomenological spectatorship of theater, a settled-back scanning or noting” of textual or spatial patterning, “as if it were a natural scene” (Fuchs 1995, p. 94). But for Stein, this way of seeing seems to go hand in hand with actual nature imagery. In her first sense of the term landscape, Fuchs interprets Stein’s notion of landscape in two ways: it is “spatial and static instead of temporal and progressive”, i.e., a way of seeing (95). And second, it also refers to a self-contained theatrical world in which images of nature appear. Fuchs stresses the spectator’s shift towards surveying the visual field in its entirety, her attention held not by “structures arranged . . . on lines of conflict and resolution” between characters “but on multivalent spatial relationships” (107). Through this kind of attention, we find ourselves neither “transported to another world” nor do we “banish all other worlds”, but rest firmly in a timeless now akin to a shift in consciousness produced during meditation (107). Stein’s writing-as-meditation is designed to produce a meditative effect on the spectator—what Stein called the “continuous present”.

Metaphysical religion on stage has always been considered the special province of the Symbolists, with Maurice Maeterlinck as the leading light. Fuchs asked if we might consider Maeterlinck’s eloquent Symbolist stage and Stein’s landscape dramaturgy as “variants of a similar modern tradition, these two static, spatial theaters with their concomitant resort to landscape” (ibid, p. 70)⁷. As variants of a modern tradition, Fuchs saw the immanent, static eternal of Maeterlinck and the repeated beginnings of Stein’s continual present as two time signatures “embedded” in each other. Unlike Maeterlinck, Stein never sought to stage the intersection of visible reality and the invisible spiritual world through mystical correspondences, but we might think of Stein’s continuous present as a secularized version of the immanent eternal.

Stein’s method of writing-as-meditation translated to the stage the constant process of beginning again and again, which mirrors a kind of meditative practice requiring the meditator to continually bring the mind back to its object of concentration when it began to wander. For many of the nineteenth-century mystics advocating for meditation, its ultimate goal was the same as Emerson’s—uniting the human mind with the divine mind, accessing divine knowledge, and healing the human being. For Stein, as we shall see, meditation’s highest end was to settle into the continuous present of the human mind in order to produce masterpieces.

Stein’s revision of Emerson and James brought together metaphysical correspondences, linguistic skepticism, meditation, movements of the mind, and contemplation of nature. In linking the religious content of Stein’s landscape plays to William James’s concept of “knowledge of acquaintance”, Rebecca Kastleman argues that the primary form of knowing presented in landscape dramaturgy “is epitomized by religion, which represents a form of knowledge that is experienced and felt but not fully available to thought” (Kastleman 2019, p. 345). She effectively shows how Stein, like many other Modernist writers, “rehabilitated religious experience as an aspect of the aesthetic” (354). Re-reading Stein through the wider context of late-nineteenth century American religious liberalism, and through Albanese’s definition of metaphysical religion in particular, Stein’s own preoccupations with the mind and mental phenomena reveal new associations. Stein’s explorations of attention, consciousness, self-consciousness, and awareness stem not just from the advent of modern psychology but also from what Eugene Taylor calls psychology’s “shadow culture” of folk healing and vernacular magical practices in the lineage that both he and Albanese trace. Stein’s most significant theoretical contributions to the theatre—her

⁷ Is it any wonder that Maeterlinck considered Emerson his “avowed master and greatest influence”, publishing an essay on his mysticism and writing the introduction to a French translation of his essays (Moses 1920, p. 11)? When *The Treasure of the Humble*, which contained Maeterlinck’s influential essay on static drama, “The Tragical in Daily Life”, was published in 1896, he was summarily hailed as the “Belgian Shakespeare” and the “European Emerson” (Frothingham 1912, p. 251). Perhaps Symbolism’s mystical language of correspondences and symbolic landscapes is as much Emersonian as Baudelairean, and American religion had a significant influence on the early European avant-garde as well as its native one.

notion of landscape dramaturgy and the continuous present—all reflect her preoccupation with mind and an idiosyncratic interest in nature that has roots in the metaphysical language she inherited.

4. Stein's Revised Correspondences: Human Nature and Human Mind

Gazing out at the French countryside of Bilignin, Stein's visual field inspired in her a new way of making plays: "I found that since the landscape was the thing, a play was a thing and I went on writing plays a great many plays. The landscape at Bilignin so completely made a play that I wrote quantities of plays" (Stein 1967, p. 75). Stein's transformation of nature into art provides another example of how Stein revised metaphysical concepts explored by Emerson.

For Emerson, meditative engagement with the natural world could vault the individual into an experience of his or her own divinity. In *Nature*, he wrote: "Man is a god in ruins", but "the problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul". Once indivisible, man and nature now live estranged, but to awaken to this "kindred impression" between humanity and the natural world, to feel the "perpetual presence of the sublime", one need only "go into solitude", "look at the stars", and partake in the "wild delight" that "every season and hour yields" (Emerson 2004a, p. 11). In a famous sequence, Emerson related his own ecstatic encounter in nature: "Standing on bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (12). Emerson elsewhere described this kind of revelation through the ancient system of metaphysical correspondences linking the world and the individual human spirit as "an influx of the Divine mind into our mind", a "shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul" (Emerson 2004b, p. 193).

But beyond kinship and sublime wonder, Emerson described how nature might be used to restore to man a kind of divine power through beauty and language. Beauty is generative: "The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind", he wrote, "and not for barren contemplation but for new creation". Gazing at nature's beauty inspires in the artist a desire to create beauty herself: "Thus is Art, a nature passed through the alembic of man" (Emerson 2004a, p. 20).

In placing "the things that were there", as Stein states in *Plays*, into theatrical space, objects in nature similarly passed through her unique consciousness and transmuted into art. In Stein's re-formulation of Emerson, however, the purpose of transforming nature into art is not to connect the universal to individual souls through new creation, as Emerson says. What we shall see is that Stein, like many other Modernists—as Kastleman observed—secularized religious ideas, in this case replacing divinity with art as humankind's source of transcendence.

Stein further fleshed out the relationship between the mind and natural landscapes in her book *The Geographical History of America*. To understand her ideas, we first have to define some of her idiosyncratic terms. In *Geographical History* she describes her own version of correspondences between the macro and microcosmic spheres: rather than an Emersonian "influx of the Divine mind into our mind", Stein creates a unique but analogous set of categories and details the "relation" between what she terms "Human Nature" and "Human Mind". Human Nature, for Stein, translates to individual identity—the vicissitudes of individual existence. It is subject to time's flow, and acts as its own audience, self-consciously observing itself. As Thornton Wilder summarized about Stein's book: "Human Nature, in order to be sure that it exists, must employ audience and memory. Memory informs it that it was itself in the past, and audience reassures it that it is itself in the present". Human Mind exists outside of time. Not bound by continual shifting awareness from past memory to future projections, the Human Mind, in "every moment knows what it knows when it knows it". It rests in the present moment, and does not require an outside source of input to know itself (Burns et al. 1996, pp. 362–63). Kate Davy describes *Geographical History* as Stein's philosophical system and includes with her article a chart of correspondences drawn from Stein's text. Human Nature and Human Mind

are Stein's personal version of metaphysical, cosmological correspondences, and Davy's chart only furthers this point.

Rather than positing a smaller, more limited human consciousness in relation to a divine one, Stein offered two aspects of the human, which never need open to "higher" realms. The human being herself contains both entity and identity, both a timeless mind and a time-bound nature, and Stein repeatedly asserted that "there is no relation" between human nature and the human mind. Individual human nature does not evolve towards divinity as her metaphysical counterparts suggest. Instead, Stein secularizes these metaphysical models, closing what Charles Taylor calls the immanent frame, and eliminating the conduit to other realms entirely. We might understand Stein's vision of the mind moving entirely in a horizontal plane of existence, an endless sweep without vertical reach: "yes the flatter the land the more yes the more it has may have to do with the human mind" (Stein 1936, p. 113). And this horizontality manifests spatially in the span of the landscape stage.

Geographical History also further developed Stein's thoughts on the relationship between landscapes and national character. Her preference was for American geography because of its "flatness". She wrote: "That is what makes land connected with the human mind only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind and so America is connected with the human mind. I can say I say so but what I do is to write it so. Think not the way the land looks but the way it lies that is now connected with the human mind" (ibid, p. 51). America's flatness had less to do with geography than cartography: she connected physical wandering to mental wandering, both provoked by "the straight lines on the map of the United States of America", which "make wandering a mission" (ibid, p. 57). Whatever America's actual geographic features, those peaks and ponds praised by Transcendentalists, Stein's America is "a country so big that it is divided one part from the other by ruled lines and it has to be flat" (ibid, p. 59). The American landscape's continuous horizontality, as viewed from a great distance or abstracted into the lines on a map, means that "the land has something to do with the human mind but nothing to do with human nature" (ibid, p. 81). And Stein's aim was not just to "say so" but "to write it so", to capture on the page this illimitable expanse, natural and mental, unbound by time and space.

Stein's true object of meditation in *Geographical History* revealed itself to be the nature and purpose of literary masterpieces. Why had *The Illiad* survived the centuries? Why do we still read Shakespeare or Jane Austen or the Bible? And moreover, what exactly makes them the enduring works that they are? She surmised, as Thornton Wilder wrote, that though such masterpieces may traffic in the sort of local details that comprise human nature, they are ultimately products of the human mind, the "principal expression" of which "is in writing and its highest achievement has been in literary masterpieces". In his introduction to *Geographical History*, Wilder tells us that encountering these masterpieces, the "vast multitudes of the world who [strive] to escape from the identity-bound and the time-immersed state, recognize that such a liberation has been achieved in these works" (ibid, p. 8). Wilder's language here evokes a particularly metaphysical soteriology with clear hints of Buddhist and Hindu influence. In general, the purpose of meditation, according to some Buddhist and Hindu doctrines, is to release the individual from *samsara*, a term shared by the two religions which denotes the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth to which all embodied (read: identity-bound and time-immersed) beings are subjected. Buddhists speak of *nirvana* and Hindus speak of *moksa*, both of which are often translated as "liberation" from *samsara* (Keown 2004; Johnson 2009). Here Wilder invoked the thread of Asian traditions that runs through metaphysical religion, without connecting it to any specific doctrine or lineage.

In *Geographical History*, Stein playfully revised the entire metaphysical project for a modern culture of doubt. "Human Mind" replaced "Divine Mind" as the timeless, boundless entity towards which the writer/devotee aspires. And while this is no devotional handbook, *Geographical History* suggests that the ultimate goal of "liberation", of escape from the limitations of human nature, could be attained through encounters with masterpieces of literature. Through her Modernist aesthetics, Stein articulated a deeply Romantic notion of the salvific nature of art. A masterpiece is a material manifestation of the

human mind. Both are timeless—they “have no finishing in them”—and may on the surface engage with human nature but are ultimately removed from it (Stein 1936, p. 194).

Stein borrowed these relationships from the world of metaphysical religion around her, but she changed them in fundamental ways. And she changed the form of writing to reflect its content. The emotional peaks and rhetorical valleys of Romantic writing in general could never capture Stein’s notion of American geography and its flat landscape or the horizontality of the modern social imaginary. For Stein, there is no Thoreauvean epiphany on Mount Ktaadn or a Jamesian “Walpurgisnacht experience” on Mount Marcy. There was no god of interest to Stein in heights or abysses. Stein’s perception of the American landscape’s perpetual flatness became a governing image for the timelessness and eternity of art rather than God. She recapitulates a Romantic religious upheaval in a modern register substituting the Human Mind for Emerson’s Divine Mind and the “Master-piece” as the Human Mind’s omega point. Her idiosyncratic prose style extends the experience of her Human Mind to her reader’s Human Mind, forcing, through word-by-word attention, a simple resting in the timeless flow of writing. For all its difficulty, it is a generous style that allows the reader to share Stein’s thought process through its perfect blend of form and content.

When Stein turned to the theater, she sought to create in her spectators a sensation similar to reading and writing. Her dramatic landscapes aim for the same by hovering always in the continuous present, a result of her distaste for syncopation. The sensation of reading Stein’s writing and of viewing landscape dramaturgy in action both capture a kind of attention similar to the practice of meditation. In reading, the magnetic pull of her style continuously returns the eye to each word after individual word. In viewing, the eye similarly drifts from thing to thing to thing across the stage. And Stein’s work consciously places the spectator in her subject position—that is, in the subject position of the meditator. It is this desire for an individual encounter with the work of art, with the masterpiece, that places Stein the continuum of American religion, which James called a fundamentally individual encounter with the divine. The mental magic of turning the vastness of nature into art is Stein’s metaphysical operation leading to human “liberation” through literature: behold natural landscapes, transmute natural landscapes to an aestheticized vision, cultivate inner landscapes, place these inner landscapes on stage in the form of a masterpiece, and use them as vehicles for connection with the infinite (though not divine) source that is the Human Mind. The object of Stein’s reformation of Emerson is salvation by masterpiece⁸.

In Wilder’s introduction to *Geographical History*, he asks: “If then Miss Stein is writing metaphysics, why does she not state her ideas in the manner that metaphysicians generally employ?” He answers his own question, saying that in order to decouple previously used terminology from prior systems, metaphysicians must invent their own “private language”. Second, Stein is an artist, a being far more engaged with poetry than theory, and she writes in a series of “metaphysical metaphors”. Wilder’s answers situate Stein in a continuum of thinking about metaphysics, modernity, art, and God that coalesce at the end of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries. As Charles Taylor observed, the advent of modernity brought about “new conditions in which belief and unbelief uneasily coexist” (C. Taylor 2007, p. 295). Stein invented her own terminology to describe the workings of her consciousness, but her terms borrow from several centuries of American metaphysical discourse. Stein removes the metaphysician’s vertical axis connecting self and divinity (Emerson’s “Divine mind into our mind”) and turns it into an ever-expanding horizontality. She creates terms that share resonances with a belief system but strips them of belief, or at least casts a skeptical eye towards it, and renders the relationship between Human Nature and Human Mind a thoroughly humanistic one. Though Human Mind is timeless, without memory, without individual identity and appears to encompass Human Nature, it is also never associated, like its metaphysical analogues, with

⁸ As Albanese wrote: “Emerson was connecting human will to a higher source of will and desire, and he was arguing for the release of the self into that vastness—a thoroughly metaphysical logic that would come to characterize some late-nineteenth-century American spirituality” (Albanese 2007, p. 167).

transcendence. Art enters the picture as a possible recourse to divinity, or if not divinity, something deeper in the world.

On the salvific nature of art, Charles Taylor shows how art, as a category, emerged in the Romantic era and served as a possible sphere for exploring and disclosing “very deep truths which in the nature of things can never be obvious, nor available to everyone, regardless of spiritual condition” (ibid, p. 356). Art was elevated to a space in which religious feeling was formerly the only occupant, and to art was bestowed the power to articulate a sense of mystery that may or may not stem from divinity. Unbelief need not lead to materialism, nor belief necessarily lead to religion. Rather, a spectrum of belief opened up—from an atheistic “mystery of anthropological depth” to religious orthodoxy, with nature, art, and the “spiritual” all offering various shades in between. Taylor credits art with filling the void left by the breakdown of received public doctrine. “Where formerly poetic language could rely on certain publicly available orders of meaning”—the Renaissance doctrine of correspondences or the Great Chain of Being, for example—“it now has to consist in a language of articulated sensibility”—that is, an idiosyncratic language issuing from the individual artist (ibid, p. 253). The Romantic period, Taylor argued, required “subtler language” to describe that which exists outside of the “pre-existing lexicon of references”, and the artist provided that new language (ibid, p. 354). By way of example, Taylor offers Rilke’s angels in the *Duino Elegies*: “We cannot get at them through a medieval treatise on the ranks of cherubim and seraphim, but we have to pass through this articulation of Rilke’s sensibility” (ibid, p. 353). Stein similarly creates her own quasi-metaphysical terms, as Wilder states, her own subtler language, to nod to the metaphysical tradition she inherited, and she revised it to encompass a sense of skepticism.

5. Four Saints in Three Acts

Metaphysical religion, landscape, and the elevation of art all coalesce in Stein’s 1927 libretto for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, an opera she co-wrote with American composer Virgil Thompson. The prologue of the play, subtitled “A narrative of prepare for saints”, tracks the mind of a writer engaged in the act of writing the very opera libretto we read on the page or view in performance (Stein 2016, p. 15). Stein stages the mind in action by assigning to a chorus of saints the various subjects that cross her mind as she prepares to write. Her wandering language skips from one thought to the next until she dutifully returns to the object of her meditation: the play she is writing. From the task of preparing for saints, she moves without transition into a short digression about “what happened today, a narrative”, until she suddenly returns again to setting the scene of her opera: “Imagine four benches separately” (ibid, p. 15). *Four Saints* captures this continual process of thinking, disruption, and return. As Marc Robinson states, “In *Four Saints*, the work of prayer”, its rigorous turning and returning to God, “stands in for the work of writing, and both are distinguished for their arduousness as much as their ardor” (Robinson 2009, p. 196).

In addition to saints and other images of religious piety, the play teems with nature imagery. The time that elapses across its many scenes and tableaux trace both a seasonal and mental thaw, moving from “April fools’ day” to “June and June” (Stein 2016, pp. 19, 35). As early spring melts into summer in Avila, Stein slowly discovers how “Saint Teresa half in doors and half out of doors” will have finally, halfway through the play, “begun to be in act one” (ibid, pp. 19, 24). She seems to worry how exactly to get all of the saints on stage and how to rather unsymmetrically fit four of them into only three acts: “Four saints two at a time have to have to have to have to” (ibid, p. 16). But as the world begins to burst into bloom, suddenly there is “Saint Teresa advancing” along with Stein’s own ideas (ibid, p. 21). In and amongst images of a cloistered garden, a tree, eggs, “pear trees cherry blossoms pink blossoms and late apples”, magpies and pigeons in the grass, we find “St. Teresa II in ecstasy” and a “Vision of a Heavenly Mansion”, two images associated with the real life Teresa’s euphoric devotion (ibid, pp. 23, 29). But the play does not end with Teresa’s religious apotheosis; it ends with Stein’s secularized metaphysical one.

Robinson's gorgeous reading of *Four Saints* alongside St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* compares the authors' individual journeys towards deep interiority: Teresa's goal is to unite with God in that innermost secret space of the self, but Stein desires to fully unite with her own process of thought, to make her way to the Human Mind, and capture the monumental work of writing a masterpiece. To describe the religious work the piece performs, I would suggest that perhaps Stein's saints have more in common with the sanctified loafing of Walt Whitman than with anything particularly Catholic about the rigors of Catholic mysticism. Though she writes that "saints are never idle", their placement in the landscape of the play invite audiences, too, to loaf, to behold. If for Whitman the ecstatic gazing at American panoramas engendered mystical union with spirit, for Stein, witnessing the moment-by-moment flow of thought, the image-by-image task of writing, engendered the liberating force of art.

In the "Prologue to Act IV", Stein returns to the question that she has turned over and over earlier in the play: "How many saints are there in it" (ibid, p. 27). But now she rephrases the question: "How many acts are there in it" (ibid, p. 34). She asks both, repeatedly until the answer arises, and she announces triumphantly: "Four acts. Act Four." And here Stein thrusts the saints into the celestial realm as she finds her way towards the play's completion. There is "no scenery but the sky, with tumultuous clouds and a sunburst. Saints in Heaven". This is not Bernini's Teresa in ecstasy with the looming angel ready to pierce her breast from above, nor is it the vertical expanse conjured by the image of the heavenly mansions. Stein's heaven here is the infinite horizontality of sky, of the Human Mind, and of the artistic masterpiece. She emphasizes this horizontality in the language as well as the mise-en-scène: "They have to be to see. To see to say. Laterally they may". And later, in a kind of blessing: "Saint Ignatius and left and right laterally be lined". Finally satisfied with what she has wrought, Stein declared the fourth to be the "Last act. Which is a fact" (ibid, p. 35).

Here Stein created a theater of ever-unfolding expansion, vast horizontal reaches without end, plotless and therefore timeless, as the spectator watches, with total absorption, her thoughts arising onstage. Stein's image of the celestial realm offers not a vision of an eternity to come but a taste of how transcendent realms may be accessible within the here and now—the continuous present—through gazing at worldly landscapes. Dydo writes that Stein rejected structures that were "vertical, hierarchical, and fixed. The landscape of Stein's world is horizontal, democratic, and fluid. In it all things and all words are of equal value; nothing is more important than anything else nor are words permanently attached to things. To call hers a comic world means that nothing is sacred but that everything is sacred, from small to large, from near to far, from word to word" (Dydo 2003, p. 57). This is not just true of Stein's world but of the larger shift away from the "vertical" and "transcendent" into the "closed" and "horizontal" "modern cosmic imaginary" Taylor described (C. Taylor 2007, p. 556).

So we have seen a way of thinking about Stein's most significant dramatic ideas that takes into account the particularly American religious background that surely helped form them. She adopted metaphysical language, but in the spirit of Emerson and James—as Richard Poirier suggested—makes that language less precise, more vague, at once permeable but more capacious, reflecting modernity's turn towards secularism. Stein opened metaphysical systems to doubt, leaving room for postsecular choice. Though a Modernist, Stein, like her Romantic antecedents, elevated artistic masterpieces to a third space, one that was no longer religious but not entirely secular. Her work and ideas carry the deep imprint of this particular metaphysical language, and though we may not call her work overtly religious, some trace of transcendence remains. Perhaps this is what Robinson meant when he described a searching quality in Stein's plays, a "mysticism aris[ing] from their placid surface", a "longing for more certainty" that "gives Stein's theater a strangely spiritual aspect" (Robinson 1994, p. 19). The progenitrix of the other American drama was formed in the same crucible as the other American religion.

6. Coda

Stein's work sits at a thorny, postsecular nexus between a disenchanted, bounded, modern universe and an enchanted, porous, mystical world. Her theatrical inheritors and interpreters have likewise inherited both of these sets of meanings, and when they channel Stein, they channel both the metaphysical mists and the skepticism from which her work sprung. This tension is often visible in their works. Postmodern theater-makers took up Stein's project, further fleshing out her theories about writing in the dimensional space of the stage. The influence of Stein on the works of the Living Theatre, Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group, and others has been traced more fully elsewhere, but here I will mention a few. To return to the web of associations that tie Stein to American metaphysical religion and its roots in liberal Protestantism, it seems more than coincidental that many of these later artists who have been deeply in dialogue with Stein's formal dimensions have also found themselves engaged with the combinative nature of American metaphysical spirituality.

Alisa Solomon observed that from its midcentury emergence, experimental performance in America engaged in dialogue with religion, both within the institutions that supported it and in the content of the work itself. Institutions such as "Theater Genesis in St. Mark's Church under rector Michael Allen; Judson Poets' Theatre under minister Al Carmines at the Judson Memorial Church; and the Theater at St. Clements under its vicar Sidney Lanier"—key figures in the Off-Off-Broadway movement—grew out of artistic and social programming produced through liberal Protestant congregations (Solomon 2011, p. 13). Bread and Puppet, the Living Theatre, and the Performance Group were among the most visible companies that staged their call for political and spiritual transformation through experimental dramaturgies.

Starting with the Beat generation of the mid-1950s, a mistrust of scientific rationality and institutional religion sparked spiritual revivals, an interest in Eastern traditions, and a fascination with eclectic forms of metaphysical religion. To engage with the religious concerns of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, theater artists looked to prophets of their own like Antonin Artaud, whose *The Theatre and Its Double* was translated into English in 1958, and the experimental laboratory of Jerzy Grotowski. For other alternative dramaturgies, they also looked to Stein. Though her engagement with the sacred was far less overt than in the work of Artaud and Grotowski, Stein's secularization of metaphysical concepts paradoxically paved the way for both sincere ritualized theatrical events that aimed to incite spiritual and political revolution (as in The Living Theatre and the Performance Group) as well as far more skeptical works that resist spiritual communion (as in the Wooster Group or Richard Foreman).

The Living Theatre, like many American experimental artists, cut their teeth on Gertrude Stein. In 1951, five years after their founding, they staged Stein's opera libretto *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) in a program of poetic dramas rarely produced in America at the time. Their most famous work, *Paradise Now* (1968), though not particularly Steinian, was structured according to a host of metaphysical references, including the ten *sephirot*, or emanations, of Kabbalah as well as the I-Ching and the chakra system. Part happening, part rite, the company led the audience through a series of "rituals, visions, and actions" to usher in a new world through non-violent revolution (Walker 2019). As Christopher Innes wrote of the Living Theatre: "They repeatedly termed their political aim "prophesying", described their theatre as "performing a ceremony" and its intended effect as "absolute communion", referred to the actor as "a priest" or "shaman", and pointed out their "concern with primitive and mystic rituals"" (Innes 1981, p. 187). This combinative spirituality, bringing together medieval Jewish mysticism, a Chinese divinatory system, and the Hindu-Buddhist centers of spiritual energy in the body directly reflects the language of American metaphysical religion.

Elinor Fuchs argues for a connection between Stein's landscape dramaturgy and the works of various postmodern theater-makers whose pieces feature "non-linear spatial structures, and are concerned not with individual character or a temporal progression but with a total state or condition" and "also draw important moments of imagery from natural landscape" (Fuchs 1995). Fuchs pivots away from connections to natural landscapes when discussing the works of Richard Foreman and Liz LeCompte, arguing instead for a concept of "mindscapes", particularly in the case of Foreman..

Richard Foreman has long decked his hermetic mindscapes with occult symbols, Hebrew letters he does not read, and Jewish prayer paraphernalia. If, as Albanese suggests, American metaphysical religion has served to democratize the occult, Foreman's project may be said to re-consign such secrets to the shadows. Foreman presents occult signs that point back to nothing, divulging secrets in languages we no longer speak, offering esoteric mysteries into which no one can be initiated. Foreman, who directly acknowledges his debt to Stein, also described himself as a "closet religious writer" (Foreman 1992, p. 5).

The Wooster Group's engagement with American metaphysical religion is subtler, but many of their productions use technology to channel the voices of the dead. In *Rumstick Road* (1977), one of their earliest works, audio recordings of Spalding Gray's deceased family members featured prominently in the technological warp and weft of this experimental memory play, which also borrowed text from Mary Baker Eddy's writings on Christian Science. Ron Vawter's now-famous rendering of Vershinin's final speech in *Fish Story* (1994), recorded and glowing through screens present on stage, allowed the dying Vawter to remain in this world as he stepped one foot into the next. In 2007's *Hamlet*, Richard Burton's staging of Shakespeare's play came alive in the theater again, embodied and voiced by company members performing in front of a recording of Burton's 1965 production. Theater itself, usually consigned to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns, was here released from its videotaped purgatory to speak again through a willing company of mediums. In *Early Shaker Spirituals* (2014), a "record album interpretation", the Group channeled Shaker women who were believed to have received messages from the spirit world and captured them in song. It also bears noting, particularly with regard to *Early Shaker Spirituals*, that in a rediscovered chapter of Thomas Edison's diary—recovered in 2015—Edison discussed his desire to create a phone to the afterlife. In the post-WWI Spiritualist revival, Edison sought to capture the voices of the departed through technology and detailed his scientific theory explaining how these voices might be recorded. While the Wooster Group's technological obsessions may spring more recently from experiments with postmodern intermediality, the roots of these obsessions stretch far further back into the shadowy spaces of American religious longing.

While this article has primarily focused on the religious reverberations in Stein's work, a fuller picture of the metaphysical avant-garde would bring the spiritual resonances in Stein together with a greater exploration of the ritual performances of midcentury. It might ask why the skepticism in Stein gives way to the sincerity of communal ritual in groups like the Living Theatre and the Performance Group only to be replaced by skepticism again in Foreman and the Wooster Group. It might ask how Stein's dramaturgy and the current occult revival come together onstage today. It might ask why Reverend Al Carmines, Off-Off-Broadway pioneer, the liberal Protestant minister at Judson Memorial Church, founder of Judson Poets' Theater, and composer of five musicals about Gertrude Stein, articulated his own conflation of God and art this way: "If you want to know how to live, go to church. If you want to know how your life is in its deepest roots, go to the theater" (Martin 2005).

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