

“my sand my sand my said”: On Reading *Stanzas in Meditation* Aloud

I was thinking about talking about sand and my book *No Measure*, but I think as a way to talk about both, I’m going to tell you about an experiment I conducted in October of 2023—almost exactly one year before the publication of the book and two years after I finished writing it—where I read all of Gertrude Stein’s one hundred ninety-three page poem *Stanzas in Meditation* out loud to myself. So I’ll tell you about what happened, and what I thought about afterward, and that will take us back to sand, and vibration, and *No Measure*, and I’ll end with reading a little bit from it.

Stanzas in Meditation is about love and heartbreak. It’s also about meditation, thinking, and obsession. It’s also about signal and noise.

What Stein does, in terms of information, is give us all noise.

Stanzas in Meditation is mostly made up of function words, syntactic words, little words, what Stein scholars also describe as “neutral words”¹ or “colorless connecting words.”² These are prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, articles—words that serve as connectors, that often have little to no lexical meaning outside of their context within sentences, kind of like equations without numbers in them, just the symbols of operation. In the poem, these words have fuzzy or no referents, pronouns without person, indexical words pointing to nowhere.

Or pointing offscreen to something we can’t see.

Here are the first thirteen lines of the poem, so you can get a sense of it (and because I’ll be quoting *Stanzas* throughout this talk without necessarily smoothly transitioning into it):

I caught a bird which made a ball
And they thought better of it.
But it is all of which they taught
That they were in a hurry yet
In a kind of a way they meant it best
That they should change in and on account
But they must not stare when they manage
Whatever they are occasionally liable to do
It is often easy to pursue them once in a while
And in a way there is no repose
They like it as well as they ever did
But it is very often just by the time
That they are able to separate³

I am hesitant to submit Stein to counting, but for the matter of illustration for this talk, to help you see what I mean, of the one hundred five words in this excerpt, approximately two-thirds of them fall into this class of syntactic words. I admit that this count is slippery, which word counts for which; the point is simply that there are a lot of them, more than you would think, and I

would guess a vast majority of the words in the poem are these. The other thing is that when we have pronouns, which occur in literature all the time, we usually know who they're referring to, but that is not the case here: who is "they"?

Her nouns—she has a complicated relationship with nouns—are few and far between. They hit you like a splash of water to the face: a butterfly, a color. Between them you're left wondering who or what it is she's writing about, and why, and what it is that "they" "like"—"they" "like" *something*, they like each other, but "they"—*they* slips out, is lost in resonance, was never there to begin with.

They could refer to a former crush/lover, May Bookstaver, and also her incarnation as Helen in the novel *Q.E.D.* and also Stein's version of herself as Adele in the same.⁴ They is also the poem's speaker. They is all, they is everyone, including me.

They could also refer to the poem's own lines and stanzas.

In her recent introduction, Joan Retellack tries to find a collective noun for these theys: are they like "a murder of crows? A pride of lions?"⁵

The speaker won't give names though—"May," the name, elided and made "may" or most often "may be" or "May," the month, not the woman. The speaker won't name, can't name—the whole project is a refusal to name, to name the thing: *heartbreak*: to say it, to even give it a color. This is the signal. This is the information that's washed out.

The other thing Stein does across her body of work is repeat. And we know from Anne Carson's writing on eros that there's desire in repetition.⁶

For example, one word that repeats—possibly two hundred four times—is *wish*. But, Stein herself says that there is no such thing as repetition, so each of those *wishes* is different, and, I'd argue, uncountable. I'll say she repeats, though, here, because she does, we just need to know that her idea of repetition is something slightly different.⁷

So: Her words and phrases repeat and permute, and this trait is made more exceptional, more exceptionally impenetrable, by *Stanza*'s high frequency of very short, contentless or referentless words.

This trait made me think of signal and noise, the absence and presence of sound, of silence, of resonance, of intangibility and our (often failed) attempts to point at what we hear or don't. Static. Meditation. The use of bells in meditation. The fact that *stanza* means *room*.

In the original introduction to the book, Donald Sutherland describes the work as "vibration" within rooms: "And the words themselves, being primarily monosyllables, tend to stay put and not to progress, *to stand or arrive intensively—to vibrate*—but to contain no succession."⁸

Despite the words "contain[ing] no succession," the sections and stanzas are numbered: five parts, the parts contain fifteen, nineteen, twenty-three, twenty-four, and eighty-three numbered

stanzas respectively. There are varied line-lengths in each stanza, most about two to eight words long, if I had to guess. All of the lines begin with a capital letter. Some lines form sentences, and some of these are enjambed, but because of Stein’s syntactic play and repetition, it can be difficult to keep track of “sentences,” per se.

The unrelenting use of function words is, in an informational sense, noise. Their number and their lack of information creates something like static.

I could have thought I would think what with
What not not with only that
It is just as much noise as said⁹

Why say *noise*?

Maybe instead of noise, what I’m looking for in this poem is sound.

David Toop says, “A sound may not be connected to the conscious formation of a thought, yet may reflect feelings that are hidden from self-awareness.”¹⁰

To *sound*, to sound out. To search, to come up out of water.

Stein:

No one will pardon an indication of an interruption
Now will they be kindly meant will be too or as a sound.
I am interested in not only what I hear but as if
They would hear¹¹

Is the poem *about* sound? Is it *a* sound? How does it *sound*? I decided to read it in its entirety out loud: “*to stand or arrive intensively—to vibrate—*”

I recorded myself using the voice memo app on my phone. It took four hours and eight minutes.

For Parts One and Five, I sat outside, by myself, and in the background of the recording, you can hear crickets, birds, wind, cars, and my neighbor using an electric saw.

For Parts Two, Three, and Four, I sat inside, by myself, and you can hear the turning of pages and my pencil marks as I read.

There are also the sounds of my mistakes: stumbling over a phrase, tripping up, going back, starting again, sniffing, and laughing—pleasure, Stein would be pleased to hear.

I know that the Stein scholar Ulla Dydo also read the entire work aloud, but I don’t know if she listened back.

I was listening for sound, for rhyme and play, to see if there was something I missed only having read the text with my eyes. There is rhyme, and rhythm, and the repetitions and echoes increase and decrease the pace. Phrases refract and reflect, and you can hear it, and they're difficult to say.

But, the following week, even after listening back to it in my car, which was hard because my car is loud, but even when listening to it through headphones—what I heard wasn't what I heard when I read and listened simultaneously. Or it wasn't what came to me when I did.

What it was was noise, which is what I had hypothesized, though not like this.

What happened when I was reading was I could only read the words aloud, and I tried to keep phrases and sentences intact, but this was difficult, not knowing what would come next or how to link up her torqued syntax to other parts of itself, such that I was extremely focused on reading, not on understanding, but what is there to understand, anyway?

There are frequent uses of and puns on the words *arrangement*, *add*, *count*, and *account*.

Anne Carson says, "A written text separates words from one another, separates words from the environment, separates words from the reader (or writer) and separates the reader (or writer) from his environment. Separation is painful. [...] As separable, controllable units of meaning, each unit with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation."¹²

I stare at the words and try to read them out loud.

Reading it aloud, though, even when alone, projects me not into isolation but into the vibration of the text. The refusal to give signal, to come out and say the thing—

I refuse I I refuse or do
I do I do I refer to refuse
Or what what do I do
This is just how they like what they send
Or how to refuse what is that
That they need to sound sound lend¹³

—that refusal is what's heartbreaking, but only with the absence of measure, a "sound sound lend." The sound lends meaning, is meaning in itself and by itself.

The heartbreak I was only really able to feel when reading it out loud. I knew it in my mind, I knew that was what the poem was "about," but I hadn't ever *sensed* it, let it ring out.

I had to have such keen attention that meaning became even more fleeting. That is, by speaking, I became *less* aware of meaning, and with less meaning—with more noise—I *felt* more meaning: I felt signal.

Signal through the absence of signal. The proximal repetitions and turns like tapping on a table, a transmission through the sounder—"the same sore sounder."¹⁴

I admit, in moments, I felt something in my throat. I choked. I marked the places in pencil.

Carson: "When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps, and something becomes visible. [...] The difference between what is and what could be visible."¹⁵

Or, "keeping the difference visible."¹⁶

It is difference in which I send alike
In which instance which.
I wish to say this.
That there now it is like
Exactly like this.
I know how exactly like this is.
I cannot think how they can say this
This is better than I know if I do
That I if I say this.¹⁷

My reading aloud became a vibration: *they*: the text, its sounds, my voice. This is not a poetics of noise.

What *could* be visible? If I thought of it differently? One year later, I was thinking that grains of sand—like little, repeated function words—are indistinguishable. But vibration—vibration through a plate, cymatics—makes the vibration visible, puts the sand into an *arrangement* though the grains remain uncountable.¹⁸

Reading the poem aloud was an exercise in vibration and duration. It took a very long time, a high level of concentration, and in making sounds, the vibration of my voice—vibration, duration, and a kind of meditation, I suppose, stanzas in meditation, sounding through the room of my skull, as I tried to sense the shape of it, but it was sense in the form of sensation, the sensation of vibration, not sense as in meaning, to measure, or to make sense. The words, as sometimes indistinguishable grains, cohered into shapes I can't describe—that shuffled off, dusted off, sand swept back into jars when I closed the book.

When this you see hear clearly what you hear.¹⁹

If vibration gives the sand shape... do I like that? Is that what "they" "like"? Visibility? To see an object, its shape?

In *Stanzas in Meditation*, there are two instances of the word "sand," and they appear in the same line, in Part Five, near the end:

This which has happened is my sand my sand my said²⁰

“This which has happened”—this event, the reading—“is my sand”—“my sand my said”—the saying sand, for hours, four hours, dropping into a pile—the sandpile model, a self-organized criticality: at a critical point it’ll topple. *my said*: there’s only one way to say it and one room to say it in.

It is just as much noise as said²¹

I wish to say this. [...]
Exactly like this.²²

As for exactitude, measurement: There are four instances of the word “measure” in *Stanzas*, and three of these include a form of negation:

If it is not an ounce of which they measure²³

Not for which it is in partly measure²⁴

Or do they measure this with resist with
Not more which.²⁵

And the last instance is:

Now a little measure of me²⁶

[Kelly then read excerpts from her book [No Measure](#) (Calamari Archive, 2024). Some of these can be found in [Harp & Altar 12](#) (2023).]

¹ Dydo, Ulla E. *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises (1923-1934)*. Northwestern UP, 2003, p. 515.

² Ashbery, John. “The Impossible: Gertrude Stein.” *Stanzas in Meditation*, edited by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina, Yale UP, 2010, p. 50.

³ Stein, Gertrude. *Stanzas in Meditation*, edited by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina, Yale UP, 2010, p. 57.

⁴ Retallack, Joan. “On Not Not reading *Stanzas in Meditation*: Pressures and Pleasures of the Text.” *Stanzas in Meditation*, edited by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina, Yale UP, 2010, p. 8-10.

⁵ Retallack, 24

⁶ Carson, Anne. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Dalkey Archive, 2015, p. 113.

⁷ Stein, Gertrude. “Portraits and Repetition.” *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*. Edited by Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. Library of America, 1998, p. 288.

⁸ Sutherland, Donald. “The Turning Point: Preface to the 1956 *Stanzas in Meditation*.” *Stanzas in Meditation*, edited by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina, Yale UP, 2010, p. 39, 42. Italics mine.

⁹ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 178.

¹⁰ Toop, David. *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*. Continuum, 2010, p. 36.

¹¹ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 139.

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- ¹² Carson, 50
¹³ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 144.
¹⁴ Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. Dover, 1997, p. 5.
¹⁵ Carson, 17.
¹⁶ Carson, 69.
¹⁷ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 216.
¹⁸ See *Stanzas in Meditation*, Part Three, Stanzas VI-VIII.
¹⁹ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 133.
²⁰ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 190.
²¹ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 178.
²² *Stanzas in Meditation*, 216.
²³ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 64.
²⁴ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 98.
²⁵ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 118.
²⁶ *Stanzas in Meditation*, 208.