
Phenomenological Dissymmetry in Stein's *Ida*

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Abstract

*Very little has been said about *Ida*, this late novel by Gertrude Stein. My argument is that Stein's representation of its heroine affirms the author's life-long investment in asymmetrical, intersubjective understanding. Employing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model, I read Stein's novel as an attestation of her radical decentering of knowledge and identity. By dispossessing the female subject of social and historical connectedness, as well as the security of familial protection, Stein creates a non-discursive relationality. *Ida*, the central character, must come to terms with the alterity of the other as well as the irreducible difference between two beings. She learns that she cannot impose her will on others because they have their particular lived competence. She evolves from a solipsistic existence—not making friends, not belonging to a community, not marrying or establishing a family of her own—into a singularity. Stein liberates *Ida* from myths of identity, particularly gendered identity, which enables a temporary escape from ideological pressures wherein intersubjectivity is not simply an equation of woman=subjection and man=power but, rather, of (anonymous) body+ intentionality+ object (in the world).*

Keywords: Gertrude Stein, Modernism, Phenomenology, Inter-subjectivity

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Introduction

Now let us make it all careful and clear.

Everybody is an *Ida*. (Stein 1975, 46)

With the rise of Second Wave feminism, literary critics marshaled Stein's writing as exemplary of women's resistance to a male-dominated society. Marianne Dekoven, for example, comments that "Stein's anti-patriarchal rebellion . . . [is] in opposition to the notions of women which patriarchy provides" (*A Different* 37). Elizabeth Fifer translates the gender dichotomy into a sexual dichotomy and judges that "unreadability" signifies lesbianism in Stein's writing (13). Taking phallogocentric as the principal organizing structure of Western society, these feminists posit that resistance is intrinsic to Stein's writing in the same way that gender was intrinsic to her life. Esme James argues that "When Stein adopts a masculine persona—as in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933)—or the methods of male-dominated literary movements in *Three Lives* (written 1905-6, published 1909), she does so to critique its gender hierarchy" (n.p.). A way out of this negative theory of difference (i.e., anything not male, white, heterosexual, affluent, and Western is deemed negatively different) is to recognize that Stein's radicalization of difference is a phenomenological operation, a process that undermines the personal, individual subject while supposing that every self is, in fact, a singularity.

Thought in this light, the Steinman subject is a self in continual flux but one that also strives for wholeness. This wholeness is not a repetition of an organic or Romantic ideal but, rather, a lived wholeness that resonates with Nancy's idea of the "double articulation: that of the different times of a same 'I' and that of the different 'I-s'" (44). The disjuncture between social identity (the Subject) and the singular self-plagued Stein as she sought to understand the peculiar intricacies of identity, or "everything that was inside [people] that made them that one" and "the infinite variations . . . [of] the movements of their thoughts endlessly the same and endlessly different" ("The Gradual Making" 85-6).

Ida is Stein's final novel. In it, she pursues the motifs that plagued her throughout her career. By dispossessing the female subject of social and historical connectedness, as well as the security of familial protection, Stein creates a non-discursive relationality. *Ida*, the central character, must come to terms with the alterity of the other as well as the irreducible difference between the two beings. She learns that she cannot impose her will on others because they have their particular lived competence. She evolves from a solipsistic existence—not making friends, not belonging to a community, not marrying or establishing a family of her own—into a singularity. In effect, Stein liberates *Ida* from myths of identity, particularly gendered identity, which enables a temporary escape from ideological pressures.

Specifically, Stein's representations in *Ida* seize an experience of intersubjectivity that is not simply an equation of woman=subjection and man=power but, rather, of (anonymous) body+intentionality+object (in the world). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological intentionality is indicative of a world that is "ready-made" and of a world wherein the self cannot "possess" or impose meaning dogmatically (*Phenomenology* xvii-xviii). Positioning the world as a "horizon" of meaning composed of the physical ground, the body, and the other, Merleau-Ponty produces a model of intersubjectivity that contravenes the solipsism of the Cartesian ego.

As the "locality" through which we access the world and the world in turn "accesses" and finalizes us, the body sustains a sense of coherence for the self (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 351). A "potential movement" that reckons with the possible, the body gives us an essential understanding of the other (*Phenomenology* 109). It "projects itself into the environment in the shape of cultural objects" and performs "spontaneous acts through which man has patterned his life deposited, like some sediment, outside himself and lead[s] an anonymous existence as things" (*Phenomenology* 101, 354, 348).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, "the body unites us directly with the things [of the world] through its own ontogenesis" because the body is part of the "flesh of the visible" (*Visible* 136). In other words, the one who inhabits sees, and touches the world is in turn inhabited, incorporated, and constituted by this world. The specificity of the body is not simply the place of universality, it is also

the ground of non-substitutionally; because my own body “is always near me, always there for me, . . . with me,” my experiences cannot be substituted with another’s (*Phenomenology* 90). This not only signifies that “the other will never exist for us as we exist ourselves” because “our situations cannot be superimposed on each other,” but also that we cannot simply exchange one bodily competence for another, even though every “living body has the same structure as mine” (*Phenomenology* 433, 356, 353).

While Stein’s representation of the subject is not so much focused on delineating the sensual and raw experiences of the body, she suggests that the body is never inert, never desensitized to objects in the world. In this manner, Stein’s representation of the body can be smoothly mapped onto Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Particularly, in “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility,” Merleau-Ponty speaks eloquently about the body that is always responding to the existence of things in the world. He denies that the body can be thought of as an “in-itself” or the ultimate ground for meaning because “So that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it” (*Phenomenology* 139). In other words, objects of the world permeate the body, and so the body directs itself towards an object or an idea.

In the first half of *Ida*, the world does not guarantee coherent or intentional meaning for Ida and she struggles to learn to integrate what lies outside of herself. Integration is a struggle for her because her family, what we may think of as the first and primary apparatus of our socialization, fails to instruct her about the meaning of life, death, mourning, marriage, and even friendship. She has little connection to others because not only do her parents “easily lose one another,” they mysteriously “[go] off on a trip and never [come] back” (8). She is forced to live with one relation after another but, being “old and weak,” they die and so Ida “loses” both her great-aunt and her grandfather (10). Her transitory way of life becomes normal so that “it was always natural to live anywhere she lived and she soon forgot the other addresses” (11).

The instability of Ida’s home life stunts her symbolic education and the mysterious circumstance surrounding family members’ deaths and disappearances contributes to Ida’s unease. When visitors come bearing orange blossoms for her dying great-aunt, Ida only registers that it “was not Tuesday” and orange blossoms make her “feel funny” (9). From an “old woman,” Ida hears stories about her great-aunt who “had had something happen to her oh many years ago, it was a soldier, and then the great-aunt had had little twins born to her and then she had quietly, the twins were dead then, born so, she had buried them under a pear tree and nobody knew” (7). The passive construction of “the great-aunt had had little twins” obscures the trauma of the past. But, at the same time, it highlights the strangeness of allowing the past to author the present, of living in the shadow of the repressed event as though the meaning is always before or after us, never in the present moment. The interruptions “the twins were dead then” and “born so” sharply highlight the mystification and silencing of errant females.

Her family’s prohibition of speaking directly about women’s sexual and reproductive experiences teaches Ida about normative gender and sexual codes. The uncanny pear tree is not only a (paradoxical) substitute for the family tree but also for the apple tree in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, references to the cherry and apple trees obliquely point to Eve and the sin of female sexuality (9). The myth of sin conveys to Ida the social consensus about the danger of being female and of female sexuality. And, as a result, she learns what she is or would be to others. Furthermore, the idea of the forbidden fruit haunts Ida and so she “always hesitated before eating” (42). However, Ida’s hesitance suggests a guardedness about these myths of femininity. In preferring to go “out walking instead of sitting in a garden,” Ida also rejects the biblical narrative of woman-as-sin (89).

The hardness of signifiers, the power of the symbolic, bewilders Ida for much of the first half of the novel and leaves her unable to articulate the specific nature of her vague feelings. This denial of female sexuality informs Ida that people and words are equally ephemeral. Ida learns that pear trees are simply “funny things” (10). Her family’s repression of its history of illegitimate and possibly stillborn children teaches Ida to be wary of speaking. She lives in a mute-like state and seems to speak only to her dog, Love (10).

Ida often refrains from entering into a conversation with people, speaking only to herself because she “understood what she was saying, she knew who she was and she knew it was better that

nobody came there” (47). Any interpellation by or recognition from the outside world frightens her: “She saw a little boy and when he waved to her she would not look his way” (8). And, whenever she witnesses something new, like “a man carrying an advertisement on his back, a sandwich man,” she shrinks back from the experience and “very quickly went home” (16).

Ida’s failure to integrate into the world results in a loss of self. In avoiding the realness of the other, Ida experiences the world as a perpetual shock. She lives so completely in her head, finding herself so “interesting” that she “was always talking to herself,” even though conversations with herself “made her cry” (44). Rather than liberating her from the demands of the ideological subject, the solipsism that suppresses Ida’s symbolic development contracts the possibility of her being. Her attitude, as one character observes, “is not interesting and I am not listening” (48). Ida responds that “you do not know what you are saying, if I tell you to have to listen to what I say, there is nothing else you can do,” but the man is not convinced and he leaves Ida sitting by herself (48). Thus, when confronted with the freedom of the other, Ida is at a loss because she is unable to award to others reciprocal recognition. By reciprocal recognition, I mean an intersubjective ethos that sustains the other as well as oneself.

Reciprocal recognition is the basis of community-making and speaks to a willingness to suspend totalitarian impulses to impose our will over others. In the words of Hans Georg Gadamer, Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity but also that of the other. The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole, and in truer proportion. (305)

Gadamer calls for an investment in the larger whole not as a disavowal of imbalances in power and empowerment but as an investment in the fundamental irreducibility of the Other. Gadamer states, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (379). Reciprocal recognition, then, opens up the possibility of transformations that substantively change the make-up of the community. This also changes the nature of socially shared fantasies, reconstructing a less inflexible collective worldview. In so far as collective fantasies establish the boundaries for subjects and order how subjects may act with one another, Gadamer’s observations help to undermine the will to dominate.

Instead of reciprocity, Ida creates a symbolic twin to evade ideological subjection (9). Early on in life, she witnesses with great concern the disciplining gaze a policeman casts on a homeless woman in a park, and, as a result, Ida learns the necessity of deflecting attention away from herself (15). Ida rationalizes that had she, Winnie, “if anything happened nobody could tell anything and lots of things are going to happen” (11). The doubled self-refracts the regulating power of the social gaze so that Ida may roam the streets at night, talk to soldiers, or jump into a stranger’s car as she wishes (15-22). However, Ida’s twin is appropriated by the very ideological economy that she is supposed to countermand for her creator.

As Winnie “began to be known,” “Nobody looked at Ida,” and no one could tell her apart from Winnie (26, 42). She becomes the shadow of her copy, and her privacy and sense of self are threatened. When a strange man tracks Winnie to Ida’s home, Ida’s personal space and her sense of self-integrity are shaken by the misrecognition. And, when an officer says to Ida, “I know what you mean. Winnie is your name and that is what you mean by your not being here,” Ida feels “faint” and “afraid” (29). The twin becomes disturbing precisely because the famous twin fixes Ida, and forces Ida to be a repetition of herself (26-27). The paradox of the twin, then, is that though it was created to maintain Ida’s integrity, it becomes the very weapon that could destroy the self. The “public self” overshadows and denies the private self because the public self has the power of the direct conversation with the social and symbolic world. A self that remains strictly private and personal becomes a phantom of a being, un-articulable and unarticulated to others in the social fabric (Imran and Akhtar 2019).

This alienation is the pre-eminent lesson for Ida. She must acknowledge that without support from social apparatuses, the fantasy of self-empowerment can only turn into a hallucinatory nightmare. The imaginary twinning of the self results in greater objectification that re-installs historical subjectivity; the division of the self into public and private identities fixes the double-being into its respective parts, making it easier for the external world to regulate and interpret Ida. Not only is she imprisoned by Winnie's celebrity, but Ida is also estranged from herself and scared to engage with the world for fear of mis-recognitions.

To the same degree that symbolic reproduction of the self does not transform the nature of her interaction with the external world—because Winnie was still Ida, and Ida was still Winnie—fantasy and the imaginative act of creation do not necessarily alter her relationship to the world. While imaginative productions enable her to recuperate the self, her superstitions and interpretations of “miraculous” events bolster her retreat from the social and symbolic world so that she does not participate in the “intersubjective game”; thus, Ida has no share in community building, or what Gadamer calls “rising to a higher universality” (305). Ida's superstition and dissociation from the world perpetuate her loneliness and confusion rather than diminish them. This result, then, reveals the negative side of buying into the idea of symbolic self-empowerment.

However, Stein also criticizes the role of fantasy in sustaining subjective delusions of belonging. Instead of familial apparatuses of identity, Ida seeks out a “family of little aunts” in a church, breaching social etiquette and morals by “staying close against one or two” (12, 13). Despite Ida's instinct to protect them from a possible attack by “someone a man of course jumped out from behind the trees and there was another with him,” they offer her no reciprocal protection and decline to see her again (13). Thus, sociality and solidarity are revealed as a fantasy that ostracizes “unwanted” persons from the shelter of “polite society.”

In “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity,” Joan Scott argues that shared fantasies, or identifications, “consolidate” people as an identity group (288). These fantasies or identifications also erase divisions and discontinuities (because people “echo” one another) to enable groups to “transcend history and difference” (292, 288). Scott points out that First and Second-Wave feminists depended on the coherence of “woman” as a political category. In saying this, she identifies one of the setbacks in contemporary feminism, that is, our awareness that differences cannot always be transcended.

While Scott theorizes fantasy as a spectral apparition, an illusory appearance of unity mobilized by a politicized identity group, the crux of her idea about the consolidating power of group fantasies is still useful for understanding Stein's representation of Ida's exile from various communities (Scott 288). Because Ida cannot read social codes properly, she is rejected from the consolidated social fantasy. As a result, she must seek other avenues of belonging. Ida's expulsion demarcates patriarchal society's failure to integrate its members into its fantasy about the nuclear family.

Stein's assault on family repeatedly appears in her writing. In *The Geographical History of America*, she writes, “when you are acquainted with a whole family you can forget about them” (106); in *Painted Lace*, “Every adolescent has that dream every century has that dream every revolution has that dream, to destroy the family” (93); and, most famously, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, “There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing” (133). In *Ida*, more importantly, though the heroine loses both her family and her public identity, “Ida did not go on looking for what she had lost, she was too excited” (27). Ida's excitement is the result of sovereignty enabled by loss, and, in the second half of the novel, she meets Andrew who seems just as severed from family and other social institutions. As Ida moves from city to city and encounters a variety of people, she happens in a “hilly country” one day and she sits on the hillside with two brothers until one goes away and she remains with the other (44).

They remain there for an indefinite amount of time and “They did not go to sleep but they almost stopped breathing” (46). On the hillside, there is nothing to say because the social, symbolic world ceases to exist nor does it have much importance for the way that people interact with one another. As Ida sheds herself of genealogical and social identities, paying “no attention” to ideological

demands, she becomes part of the physical landscape, which becomes a “participant” in the making of the individual rather than simply a backdrop (46).

The landscape is a meditative trope in Stein’s writing. Tanner-Kennedy observes that “To observe the “things that were there,” Stein engaged in what she called ‘mediation.’ Much like the mental concentration of contemplative devotion implicated in the religious sense of the word, Stein used the term meditation to indicate the ‘process of realizing perception’” (n.p.). In this scene on the hilltop, Ida learns to extrapolate from these raw experiences a sense of symmetry with other beings as well as a non-reducibility: no two people can experience this event in this exact way, nor can they assimilate it in the same manner. The man who sits next to her on the hillside, too, has his interpretations of this moment because he makes statements to which “Ida paid no attention” (46).

She refrains from entering into a conversation with him, speaking up only after he has gone away because she “understood what she was saying, she knew who she was and she knew it was better that nobody came there. If they did, she would not be there, not just yet” (47). Stein signals the uniqueness of this experience by rendering Ida and the stranger’s co-existence as a non-event. This non-coincidence portrays the possibility of relating to the other as part of a continuum of the landscape rather than as part of social classification. If the dissymmetry of social identities is highlighted rather than obscured, then the security of phallogocentric hierarchies crumbles.

It is useful here to think of Stein’s representations of Merleau-Ponty’s idea about symmetry and asymmetry. Merleau-Ponty contends that the “inevitable dissymmetry of the I-Other relation” counter-weighs the fact that “I live my perception from within, and, from within, it has an incomparable power of ontogenesis” (*Visible* 80, 58). However, while he states that our perceptions are not comparable—because of corporeal situatedness—projection enables us to communicate and make meaning with others. The body is the common site of projective understanding and by “throw[ing] out its background,” the body enacts a decisive intentionality, or an intent-to-make-meaning, by collecting and selecting “meaning diffused through the object” and by the object (*Phenomenology* 111, 132).

Merleau-Ponty’s contention that dissymmetry is universal, or at least general, has also brought on charges of his blindness to difference. By not heeding discursive or causal, psychological explanations, Merleau-Ponty assumes that bodies interact in a neutralized, discursive field. For example, Irigaray remarks that “Merleau-Ponty’s whole analysis is marked by [. . .] labyrinthine solipsism. Without the other, and above all the other of sexual difference, isn’t it impossible to find a way out” of his description of the reversibility of a subject seeing and being seen (*An Ethics* 157)? Because Merleau-Ponty is more interested in delineating “‘in me’ [. . .] the permanent horizon of all my cogitations and [. . .] a dimension about which I am constantly situating myself,” the conditions for relating to the other and the condition of differences are secondary in his philosophy (*Phenomenology* xiii). This results in “no possibility for sexual difference . . . since there is no possibility for the subject and the other to coincide or interact in any way. One or the other disappears” (Kozel 115).

However, Judith Butler interjects that the “closure” of the “selfsame touching and touched the body, seeing and seen,” implicates the toucher and seer in the world so that the world is not “reducible to oneself” (“Sexual Difference” 117, 118). Moreover, she objects to the description of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as solipsistic because, in his description of the relationship of the left and right hands, there is an important “noncoincidence with oneself” that resists (en)closure (“Sexual Difference” 123, 124). Non-coincidence here must not be conflated with alienation for alienation speaks of a psychic disjuncture within oneself or a refusal of the self’s total-ness. Non-coincidence refers to the unique corporeal truth that is singular to each one of us. This corporeal specificity is never closed-off, off in itself, because it is in perpetual contact with things, geography, vegetation, and people. Non-substitutionally, then, is a form of conceptualizing otherness without closing off the reality of the outside.

We see in Ida that what she is continually “waiting” for may be this “completion,” not to be totalized but to be comprehensible in social exchange (47). However, being open to social ordering exposes the self to being over-determined by social classifications, and, as a result, Ida must be cautious:

Who is careful.
Well in a way Ida is.
She lives where she is not.
Not what.
Not careful.
Oh yes, that is what they say.
Not careful.
Of course not.
Who is careful.
That is what they said.
And the answer was.
Ida said.
Oh yes, careful.
Oh yes, I can almost cry. (63)

Ida's search for completion, through marriage and travel, without an understanding of her situatedness or self-constitution, results only in failed marriages. Ida's marriage to the three men before Andrew comes out of an impulse to please others (a reversal of her earlier desire to only please herself with her imaginary twin). This approach does mean that:

Ida often met men and some of them hoped she would get something for them. She always did, not because she wanted them to have it but because she always did it when it was wanted. Just when it was not at all likely Ida was lost, lost they said, oh yes lost, how lost, why just lost. Of course, she is lost. Yes of course she is lost.
Ida led a very easy life, that is she got up and sat up and went in and came out and rested and went to bed.
But some days she did rest a little more than on other days.
She did what she could for everybody. (108)

Stein implies that Ida is once again alienated from herself. Her "easy life" of "rest" suggests passivity and tedium rather than a sense of peace, something that I think Ida finally achieves at the end of the novel. Furthermore, because Ida is "lost," her restlessness indicates an inability to obtain a bodily and subjective center. She has gone from one extreme of existing only in herself to the other of existing only for others.

Stein's representation of Ida's development is directed towards the possibility of tranquility or "rest" for the heroine. In the first half of the novel, "Ida was always ready to wait but there was nothing to wait for her, and she went away" (47). In contrast, in the second half of the novel, Ida spends much of her time "resting" because she had Andrew, and "What she wanted was Andrew" (108). Though Ida finds "Andrew was difficult to suit and so Ida did not suit him. But Ida did sit down beside him," she continues to co-exist with him (108). Thus, while her peripatetic lifestyle indicates a restlessness suggestive of a body that is unable to assimilate or invest itself in the world, Ida's desire to "rest" speaks to a settling of things inside, to paraphrase Stein's description of the act of writing.

Toward the end of her career, the idea of movement occupies Stein's mind. In "Portraits and Repetition," she wonders "if it were possible that a movement was lively enough it would exist so completely that it would not be necessary to see it moving against anything to know that it is moving" (102). This idea leads her to query "if it is necessary to stand still to live, and if it is if that is not perhaps a new way to write a novel" (103). Ida learns to embrace the "liveliness" of staying still, of staying herself. After deciding that "She no longer even needed a twin," Ida moves from place to place performing "favors" for people (43, 68). She even enters into politics, even though "it was not politics that Ida knew. It was not politics it was favored, that is what Ida liked to do" (74). However, while she seems to become a part of the social machinery, she remains centrally herself because "When anybody needed Ida was resting. That is all right that is the way Ida was needed" (73).

When Ida meets Andrew, her perfect match, because "He was completely one of two that he was two," Ida thinks that "It was the first thing Ida had ever known the first thing" (87). Ida and Andrew are suited because they understand one another's dissymmetry, an understanding that is

fundamental to respecting the alterity of the other. This can only happen once the subject cognizes its singularity as co-existent with other singularities in the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that “when I contemplate an object with the sole intention of watching it exist and unfold its riches before my eyes, then it ceases to be an allusion to a general type” (*Phenomenology* 43). What enables intersubjective equality is a recognition that everybody is “capably of the same intentions” because between “my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system” (*Phenomenology* 353 [italics mine]). Thus, the subject’s “intentionality” is not a personal willfulness but, rather, a recognition that the world is present “before being posited by knowledge in a specific act of identification” (*Phenomenology* xvii). The subject is also left to “discover[...] and enjoy[...] his nature as spontaneously in harmony with the law of the understanding” (*Phenomenology* xvii).

The second half of *Ida*, then, stages *Ida*’s enjoyment of her nature. *Ida* realizes that “it was all to do over again, *Ida* had Andrew that is she had that he walked every day,” and she contentedly relinquishes her need to possess the other (96). Moreover, her relationship with Andrew is left open-ended so that “*Ida* was almost married to Andrew and not anybody could cloud it. She needed to be almost married to Andrew” (111). This insistence on the word “almost” refuses to constrain or fix *Ida* and Andrew’s relationship. In addition, this modifier re-affirms a conviction that *Ida* had as a child, that “a husband meant marriage and marriage meant changes and changes meant names and after all, she had so many changes” (16).

When Andrew makes his appearance at the end of the first half of the novel, he and *Ida* do not immediately have a meaningful, life-changing epiphany but “*Ida* somehow knew who Andrew was and leave it alone or not *Ida* saw him” (87). Moreover, Andrew, “If he saw her or not it was not interesting. Andrew was not a man who ever noticed anything” (87). Stein reduces their meeting to a non-event and neutralizes the drama of their first meeting. Instead, she builds up their mutual acknowledgment slowly, impersonally through statements like “Andrew did not notice *Ida*” and “This had nothing to do with *Ida*” (88, 89).

The diffusion of fraught tensions and symbolic clashes that conventionally accompany the first meeting of two lovers produces the individual characters as individuals first and foremost. And although this is a turning point in *Ida*’s relationship with the world, a relationship once characterized by a deep antipathy or fear of the outside, social world, *Ida* is atypically untransformed by the incident. She remains herself and is not transformed into the female part of the heterosexual pairing.

Andrew, too, is free from the strictures of masculinity. He, as much as *Ida*, does what he pleases and “could walk and come to see *Ida* and tell her what he did while he was walking, and later *Ida* could walk and come back and not tell Andrew that she had been walking” (96). *Ida* and Andrew enjoy doing the same activities but they act independently of one another, independently of ideological expectations, and so “*Ida* was left alone, and she began to sit” (96). When not “resting,” walking is *Ida* and Andrew’s main activity, and “anybody can take walks and anybody can meet somebody new” (96). Though she and Andrew did not walk together, “she always walked with someone as if they had walked together any day” (96). In walking, *Ida* and Andrew form provisional bonds with people that do not overwhelm their senses of themselves.

They are also not invested in consuming one another or imposing one will over the other. *Ida* is not simply content to be identified by her relationship with Andrew and “she said to herself what am I doing, I have my genius and I am looking for Andrew” (93). However, she “went on looking for Andrew” of her own volition because “he was Andrew the first. All the others had been others” (93, 111). Andrew’s uniqueness is highlighted by the fact that *Ida* repeatedly uses his name and submits to being a name herself: “*Ida* was not only *Ida* she was Andrew’s *Ida* and being Andrew’s *Ida* was more than *Ida* she was *Ida* itself” (90). As *Ida* turns into an “itself,” an essence that is fluid and porous, she achieves a total unification of self, other, and world that defies gendered myths.

Ida and Andrew perform their respective activities in what Merleau-Ponty would call a “perpetual incarnation” (*Phenomenology* 166). For Merleau-Ponty, the movement “towards an object” signifies that the body cannot “belong to the realm of the ‘in-itself’” (*Phenomenology* 139). In other words, purposeful action not only unifies the body and the self but also brings the subject

into unification with the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that “Neither body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being since they presuppose each other [...] and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation” (*Phenomenology* 166). When Ida is not “out walking,” Ida dreams and thinks “about her life with dogs,” but this only makes her “cry” because it is a retreat into memory (96, 107). At this point, the narrator observes, “They had lost her. Ida was gone” (107). However, she “came back to life exactly the day before yesterday” and “Her life never began again because it was always there” (108, 118). In other words, Stein denotes that Ida transmutes the “essence” of herself, killing it off to re-invent it.

Because she is “settled” into her nature, she feels “soothed” instead of excited or nervous by conversations about apple trees, soldiers, shepherd dogs, and lilies-of-the-valley (129, 116-7). She also realizes that preparation that had been done for a wedding is suitable for a funeral when “the telephone rang and it said Andrew was dying, he had not been killed he was only dying, and Ida knew the food would do for the people who came to the funeral and the car would do to go to the funeral and the clothes would not do dear me no they would not do and all this was just dreaming” (111). Dreaming becomes a means of manufacturing possible realities. In putting dreams and fantasies to pragmatic use, Ida inhabits the full horizon of expectations and possibilities and can conceptualize a broader order of things. For example, though she attributes the belief in superstitions as belonging to sailors, farmers and actors, she still believes that “the first of anything is a sign” and Andrew “is a sign” (119, 120).

For Kack, “Stein’s work is of significant import to the project of American writing, which is staking out its own identity (in the 1930s)” (n.p). This American writing influenced William Carlos Williams onward to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, including Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Susan Howe. She has also influenced playwrights, from Richard Foreman to Al Carmines and Rachel Dickenson. Stein’s work survives because it compels us to think about the interplay between personal and social forces and desires as it tries to work out these issues in complex and sometimes frustrating ways. But, as Stein explains, “when you make a thing, it is so complicated making it that it is bound to be ugly, but those who do it after you don’t have to worry about making it and they can make it pretty” (*Autobiography* 23). In affirming the phenomenological work and subjectivity’s absorption, Stein affirms both the plenitude of asymmetrical being as well as plenitude. In essence, the idea of non-exchangeability gives rise to an alternative model of existing in the world, in oneself, and with others.

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