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Copywriting Gertrude Stein: Advertising, Anonymity, Autobiography

Rod Rosenquist

Abstract

This article traces the parallel, though in some ways inverted, early careers of Gertrude Stein and Helen Woodward: one a celebrated but little-read modernist author and the other a widely-read but largely anonymous copywriter. The first section draws comparisons between early twentieth-century changes in advertising copy and Stein's literary innovations, focusing on the techniques used by Stein and copywriters like Woodward to direct attention to ordinary objects or promote branded products by appealing to the individual reader's experience and subjectivity. The second section goes on to consider the contrasting definitions and public expectations of the author within the contexts of high modernism and modern advertising, respectively. The article concludes with brief analysis of the techniques of attribution, promotion and anonymity within the autobiographies of these two writers, suggesting that the contrast in approaches to life writing were largely due to how creative and corporate authors held highly contrasting public positions in early twentieth-century America.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Celebrity; Modernism; Life Writing; Helen Woodward;

Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas

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Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is one of the great success stories of modernist popularity – at once the personal life writing of one of the most difficult writers of innovative literature and a volume confirming Stein's status as celebrity and bestseller.

Despite her tendency to write sometimes unreadable prose, Stein had always pursued this kind of popular reception and even from the start of her career used a newspaper clippings agency to keep track of the notices of herself or her work in the popular press. Each news clipping collected by Stein was eventually preserved in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Yale University; hundreds of public notices and reviews relating to this autobiography alone fill 27 folders in three boxes, such was her popularity and the interest in her personality in 1933. The journalistic notice that Stein attracted throughout her career is instructive of the reception of modernism's most difficult writing and the powerful publicity and celebrity it could generate. That Stein paid for this service and even occasionally annotated her public notices reveals that it was not one-way traffic. In fact, the public not only paid attention to high modernism, but high modernism cared that the public was paying attention.

One of the more fascinating clippings in the collection is not a review, nor gossip relating to her celebrity status, but published testimony to the influence Stein had had on modern American copywriting, appearing in Lewis Gannett's column for the *New York Herald Tribune* 'Books and Things', one of the most highly-syndicated books columns in the US at that time. Under the heading, 'Gertrude Stein and Advertising English', he turns most of his column over to a letter written by Helen Woodward, one-time advertising executive, whose own autobiography, Gannett tells his readers, should be better known. Woodward, for her part, wants to discuss Gertrude Stein. She says:

Some of those early short stories were grand. I was in the advertising business then and was impressed by their close resemblance to the best advertising writing, the use of short words and simple declarative sentences and repetition. We did not always write our stuff like that, but

we tried to. You could turn over the files of many magazines of those days and see what I mean.¹

Taken initially, this is a fascinating connection: direct testimony from a leading copywriter that modernist prose provided a model for modern advertising writing. But Woodward is not only full of praise, revealing that only some of Stein's writing makes good copy, and other experiments provide a negative influence on good copywriting. She observes: 'Then Gertrude Stein fell to pieces and turned out all the loose, sloppy notes of stuff, the kind of thing many of us slap down as a first draft.' She goes on to imply Stein lacks commitment or craft. Lewis Gannett steps in, feeling the need to counter Woodward with the claim that 'Miss Stein isn't lazy', pointing to the enormity of *The Making of Americans* (1925) and the labour required to even read – let alone write – *Portraits and Prayers* (1934).

Played out before an enormous, nation-wide readership, this public debate over Stein's writing between Gannett and Woodward – a syndicated literary gossip columnist and an advertising copywriter, respectively – suggests just how far the discourse of modernism took shape against a mass-media background in 1934. But even before this, during the years when Stein was writing prose that few read and fewer defended, Stein's obscure literary formulations left their mark, according to Woodward, on the kind of discourse that regularly found an even wider public than Gannett's column: the advertisements themselves. And Woodward is not alone in detecting in Stein's prose a kind of literary style that, while directly influencing only a few, through this influence found a significant readership. Another clipping from the collection reveals an anonymous reviewer for the *New Statesman and Nation* testifying to Stein's previous

manner of writing which, even while the body of her work was unpublished, made her the joy of the thousands who never read her and of the few who did. The influence of that manner is only just upon the literary; but the debt owed it by modern advertising is incalculable, and since, sooner or later, even the literary become conscious of advertisements, it seems likely that in her lifetime she may find herself the mother of all living.²

This seems an important contemporary acknowledgement, first that Stein was as widely appreciated by those who never read her as by those who did, and that her stylistic innovations likely influenced mass-media forms of writing at the same time or even before her work influenced her literary contemporaries.

This article aims to pick up this thread, examining how far the changes in advertising copy of the early twentieth century mirrored modernist literary innovations, particularly with reference to these two great pioneers of modern American writing. Helen Woodward and Gertrude Stein were both women of Jewish descent, both attended Radcliffe College, and both displayed a dedication to the craft of language with firm ambitions to be published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Woodward was a copywriter who believed Stein was a good model for the language of advertising; Stein was a writer of difficult and obscure modernist writing that believed in the democratic appeal of all language and that even her most challenging writing should provide ordinary readers with the same experience they received from the most common advertising language. There are also connections between these two women writers in how they positioned themselves as authors – walking a tightrope between a promotional discourse and anonymity, between object-oriented and subject-

oriented writing – and in their eventual decisions, as my conclusion will show, to personally reveal themselves to the reading public through autobiography.

I. Focus on Readers: Promotion and Reception

Helen Woodward was in the advertising trade between 1903 and 1924, a period that almost identically coincides with Stein's early writing career. After learning secretarial work – including the use of an early version of the dictating graphophone, Woodward got a job with a mail-order book-subscription company, where in her second year she requested to try writing her own advertisements, selling, as she says, 'Literature by the Pound'.³ Finding great success in writing copy, she would have her work read by millions during her time in the industry, though she remained throughout her career almost entirely unknown outside the advertising fraternity where she was one of the earliest admitted females. Conversely, though Woodward was reading Stein at the beginning of both their careers, she would have been an exception – at least in studying it sincerely – since Stein's writing at this time attracted a very small readership. Only 4000 total copies of Stein's first three books were produced – *Three Lives* (1909), *Tender Buttons* (1914) and *Geography and Plays* (1922) - and not all of those copies had sold by the time she suddenly became a bestseller with the publication of her 1933 autobiography. Still, as the 1934 reviewer from *The New Statesman and Nation* suggests and literary critics have more recently demonstrated, Stein's literary innovations were well-known far beyond those who bought her books. In other words, Woodward was read by everyone, but entirely anonymous, whereas Stein was read by almost no one, but was a celebrity nonetheless.

That Stein's lack of readership might lead to her celebrity is something, despite its paradox, about which Stein herself was well aware. On her lecture tour of the United States in 1934, Stein was surrounded by a curious group of Hollywood elites (Stein mentions

Dashiell Hammett, Anita Loos, Rouben Mamoulian and Charlie Chaplin): ‘they wanted to know how I had succeeded in getting so much publicity, I said by having a small audience.’⁴ While there is some irony in Stein lecturing Chaplin on how to attract publicity, and that it is through smaller audiences, Stein’s model – that, as she goes on to explain, ‘the realest poetry has a small audience not a big one, but it is really exciting and therefore it has the biggest publicity’ – has been explored by modernist critics like Lawrence Rainey, Mark Morrisson, Catherine Turner, Sean Latham and Aaron Jaffe, among others, revealing how closely modernist market value is sometimes linked to limited availability or obscurity.⁵ With Stein there is still a tendency to consider her celebrity as the product of her bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, although Karen Leick has revealed the extent to which her trademark prose had already made her a celebrity twenty years before this volume found for her a large audience.⁶ For Stein, the public notice of her limited-edition volumes of difficult prose led to enormous publicity, despite the lack of audience for her texts.

Even if the ordinary reader did not know what to make of her extraordinary language, the fact that it was extraordinary drew attention – and discourse that drew attention was exactly the business modern advertising was engaged in. Alyson Tischler, for one, has revealed how ‘Steinese’ provided fuel for advertisements that directly referenced her works in the 1930s, including the department stores Gimbels, Wanamaker’s, and Bergdorf Goodman (‘A Rose is a Pose is a Rose is a Pose’ or ‘4 Suits in 2 Acts’).⁷ Tischler’s article, based on close examination of the Stein clippings, reveals just how far even the most experimental of Stein’s prose worked its way into mass culture, although she does not pick up on the influence Stein had on copywriting. But equally interesting, in this respect, is Stein’s own interest in the mass-cultural forms of advertising language as revealed through her life writing. For example, Stein remembers in *Everybody’s Autobiography* encountering American ads on her lecture tour, ‘the shaving advertisements that delighted me one little

piece on one board and then further on two more words and then further on two more words a whole lively poem.’⁸ These are the famous ‘Burma-Shave’ advertisements placed in short phrases a distance from each other along American highways between 1926 and 1963. As Ulla Dydo reveals, Stein’s papers at the Beinecke include a collection of these jingles, some of which reflect not only their mass-marketing purpose but, casting off the more typical rhyming couplets, began to engage the language of modern poetry:

Holler

Half a pound

For half a dollar

Isn’t that

A cheerful earful⁹

Stein in collecting the playful language of these advertising jingles and acknowledging her ‘delight’ in this form of mass-market writing confirms her interest is sincere. But Stein’s engagement with advertising copy emerges long before her popular success or her lecture tour of the United States. As early as 1916, Stein wrote a piece (later collected in *Geography and Plays*) entitled simply ‘Advertisements’. Written in a style reminiscent of her more famous text, *Tender Buttons*, it is considered by Stein one of her ‘Plays’, as she would recount in her lecture with that title. For Stein, plays were a form of writing that got away from the ubiquitous narrative voice that one found everywhere:

Something is always happening, anybody knows a quantity of stories of people’s lives that are always happening, there are always plenty for the

newspapers and there are always plenty in private life. Everybody knows so many stories and what is the use of telling another story.

For this reason, Stein sought for kinds of writing that escaped this narrative ‘happening’, concluding ‘that anything that was not a story could be a play and I even made plays in letters and advertisements.’¹⁰

Stein’s ‘Advertisements’, then, echoes the advertising copywriting of her era in terms of not being focused exclusively on narration and the constant ‘happening’ of fiction, taking up instead the discourse of simple objects, foods or places, described subjectively and through language intentionally framed to provide new perspectives. Each short paragraph announces its object with a short heading, including ‘An Exhibition’, ‘The Boat’ and ‘A Grape Cure’. These short prose poems offer fairly typical Steinese – disjointed in narrative, concentrating on ordinary objects from within a fractured subjectivity – but also the unmistakable consumer-centred short phrases of good advertising writing: ‘White melons have a delicious flavor.’ ‘I will adorn the station. It has extraordinarily comfortable seats.’ ‘Rain water is so delicious. It is boiled. We boil it.’¹¹ But all of these objects are notably generic, not promoting any specific station or some brand or variety of white melons, but the publicly-available and universal, such as ‘rain water’. As Stein announces early in ‘Advertisements’, fully revealing the tension between the branded or ‘named’ object and the generic or commonplace: ‘I see no necessity for disclosing particularity I am mightily disturbed by a name such as an English home. An English home is beautiful. So are the times.’¹² In Stein’s advertisements, there is no particularity and all material goods, all time and space, is beautiful. We are told the Mallorcans are ‘so good to offer us ice cream’ but that they ‘do not know the french names’, leaving not only the product unbranded, but even the flavours undefined.¹³

These individual phrases reveal the promotional language of generic products in Stein's 'Advertisements', but fail to capture the full experience of her complete advertisements. Here is another of her 'Advertisements' in full.

PLEASURES IN SINCERE WISHES

I wish you to enjoy these cigarettes. They are a change from those others.

I understand that you had some very good ones. You are not able to get these any more. I have tried to get them. They tell me that they cannot say when they will come. They do not know that about them. We sleep easily. We are awakened by the same noise. It is so disagreeable.¹⁴

This is clearly not so conventional a use of advertising language as the 'delicious flavor' of melons or the 'extraordinarily comfortable seats' of the station, but here is where Stein's advertising techniques become particularly modern in their approach. Of course there is still no brand specified, so it is not advertising itself, and yet the question of competing brands is clearly in focus. Still, the promoted brand of cigarettes is not announced as better; the 'you' has clearly had 'very good ones'. But there is a prompt by the 'I' voice to enjoy 'a change', especially, it seems, because this variety is difficult to obtain – offering a fascinating promotional tactic akin to that employed by modernist writing, as described above: it is a challenge to find, it is new, it marks a change. But there is another technique at work in this advertisement for an unnamed brand of cigarette in terms of its narrative thread. After the testimonial and the description of supply and demand, there is the seeming non sequitur, 'We sleep easily. We are awakened by the same noise.' As with any explication of Stein's writing – or advertising, for that matter – it is perhaps unwise to strain to make the entire passage cohere. Instead, it is worth simply noting that the 'you' and the 'I', with her 'sincere

wish' to share her own limited brand of cigarette, have become a communal 'we', sharing perhaps a night of smoking, sleeping easily, then being awoken by a disagreeable noise. It is only this subjective experience, derived from the desire to share a favourite kind of cigarette, that pulls together a coherent 'advertisement'. In fact, it is clearly announced in the title, a phrase that would not have been out of place in the print ads of the time: 'Pleasures in Sincere Wishes'. How far, the reader must ask, do these pleasures extend? It is not a singular pleasure, that of smoking – which is where a traditional advertisement might stop – but includes the further plural pleasures of sharing the few remaining cigarettes, pursuit of further supply, followed by the ease of sleep and the bond of being awoken together in the night.

Certainly Stein's narrative is distinctive and we can identify a number of ways that this text is *unlike* a modern advertisement, but it is worth returning to Helen Woodward to



understand just how alike the two forms of discourse can be. As an advertising pioneer, Woodward was asked as early as 1917 to comment on the dramatic changes in copywriting techniques developing since the start of that decade. Writing for *Postage: The Magazine of Direct Mail Advertising*, Woodward discusses the new approaches historians of advertising have more recently identified as key developments in the emergence of ‘modern advertising’. She writes, ‘Don’t sell a man a car – sell him pleasure. Don’t sell a woman baby food – sell her love for her baby. Don’t sell accident insurance – sell relief from

fear. Don’t sell books – sell entertainment, instruction and ambition.’¹⁵ This advertising approach of focusing beyond the object for sale – integral to our understanding of modern advertising – is revealed by historians of the industry to be evolving at the same time Stein is developing her own ‘advertisements’. Raymond Williams, for instance, identifies the shift to be most pronounced with the start of the First World War, pointing to Savile Lumley’s iconic poster ‘Daddy, What did YOU do in the Great War?’ (fig. 1). First made public in 1915 (a year before Stein’s ‘Advertisements’ and two years before Woodward’s ‘Egeria’), this poster clearly does not promote the war itself, or even the ‘traditional appeals to patriotism’, but, as Williams suggests, it plays upon ‘basic personal relationships and anxieties’ to compel the viewers to the desired outcome.¹⁶

Woodward, in the 1917 issue of *Postage*, is reviewing advertisements of the same period with the same intention – she offers reproductions, in fact, of five ads with which she

herself has been involved that take up this approach. These include advertisements referred to in the quote above: The Liberty Brougham (‘Don’t sell a man a car – sell him pleasure’), Aetna Life Insurance (‘Don’t sell accident insurance – sell relief from fear’), and sets of books by Mark Twain and O. Henry (‘Don’t sell books – sell entertainment, instruction and ambition.’) And in her autobiography, she particularly identifies the marketing of these books as her work at its innovative and ‘sensational’ best, taking the apparently novel tactic of selling books not for their calf-skin covers or the ‘classic’ names on their titles, but that ‘perhaps – just barely perhaps – people might be induced to buy [literature] for what was in the books rather than for what was outside them.’¹⁷ Instead of describing the bindings or the famous titles, Woodward tried her hand at capturing the style of the authors she sold: ‘So in writing about Mark Twain I called back to the reader the feeling of his own boyhood. The advertisements were always young.’¹⁸ Woodward remembers, ‘It was a revolution. “Human interest” had marched into book advertising.’¹⁹

It is equally worth examining Woodward’s campaign for Nestlé’s baby food (fig. 2), where it is clear from first glance – a photo of a mother embracing her baby and the caption ‘Be True to Your Trust’ – that the tin of food itself is not the central focus. Rather the emphasis is on the bond, mother and child, and trust in the motherly instinct. It is taken for granted that a mother is furnished with the wisdom and love to nourish the ‘growth of the soul’ of the infant. But the copy evocatively raises a mother’s doubts: ‘Are you ready for the



Fig. 2: From *Motion Picture Magazine*, August 1915, p. 184.

growth of the body also? For that little body your mother's milk is given. And when that mother's milk proves not enough – would you try to put your baby off with cow's milk meant for sturdy calves? It is part of your trust to know that cow's milk is not for your baby – that it may bring consumption – may bring each passing disease'. Before the infant formula can even be described, the reader is made to feel warmth, affection, certainty, pride, anxiety and ultimately fear. Woodward urges copywriters in 'Egeria' that 'whatever you sell you are filling a need or creating a need, and it is that need, that desire, that ambition, or fear, or that love on which you should dwell, rather than the inanimate object which you are selling.' Stein's 'Advertisements', written the year after this campaign was launched and the year before 'Egeria' would detail how it worked, takes a not dissimilar approach, though without the hard sell. It is not the particular, inanimate objects that matter, but how these things are shared, how they are found, how they are enjoyed, and to what they lead. Whether it is cigarettes, white melon, insurance or baby food, modern writers hold up the objects only in order to provoke the readers to see beyond their material form, to convey the feelings of 'sincere wishes' of sharing cigarettes or the 'the growth of the soul' of a child. Even the outcome in these two texts is similar, with the 'human interest' evocation of an untroubled sleep, whether interrupted by a noise (for Stein) or a child (for Woodward), leading to the quiet experience of a shared bond in the night.

II. Focus on Writers: Anonymity and Authorship

While examining the similarities between the discursive strategies of the modernist writer and the modern copywriter, however, one should not ignore the primary differences between the two: the role of the author. Only one of the two advertisements described above appears under the author's name, collected and reprinted in a number of volumes of that author's work still available a hundred years later. The other advertisement fell out of circulation

within a couple years, nor can we be sure it was completely authored by one person, or that this person was Woodward. In other words, modern copywriting engages in some of the same work of the modernist author, but without asserting authorship of any kind. For, as Jennifer Wicke has suggested, ‘Advertising answers all Foucault’s criteria [in ‘What is an Author?’] for a discursive practice, yet remains functionally authorless and undesignated.’²⁰ Catherine Fisk has also examined how modern authorship was affected by the corporatisation of creativity during the age of advertising.²¹ Roland Marchand has explored the historical contexts in great detail, revealing the dissatisfaction of copywriters of the early twentieth century in terms of subordination and anonymity: ‘Their creations were not merely criticized; they were judged by improper standards, emasculated by revisions, and given no credit.’ The emphasis for copywriters may have shifted with the beginning of the century from the object for sale to the consumer’s subjective associations and experiences, but the copywriter’s task was never creativity for the sake of creativity or self-expression. As Marchand reveals, the advertising agencies of the time were increasingly attracting copywriters ‘slightly ashamed’ of the industry, who really wanted to write the ‘Great American Novel’. On the other hand, ‘Critics of the passion for self-expression reminded their restive colleagues that an advertisement was “not a personal thing” but was best produced by a group effort. Its purpose was not self-expression, but the sale of goods and services. Readers should not say “What a fine ad,” but “What a fine thing to buy!”’²²

Again, it is interesting to turn to Woodward for her perspective. Her autobiography, for instance, makes clear that her earliest ambitions were to publish her fiction, sending a story when she was fourteen to *The Atlantic Monthly*.²³ It was rejected and Woodward turned to copywriting, but she continues, throughout her autobiography, to place writing creatively next to copy. For instance, she claims copywriters have

more emotional intelligence than other groups of people in business.

In writing good advertising it is necessary to put a mood into words and to transfer that mood to the reader – it is just as necessary to do this in advertising as it is in the short story, indeed more so [...] you must also make him walk out and buy your product.²⁴

Still, this ‘emotional intelligence’, shared between creative writers and copywriters, is not enough, and she recalls being asked by ‘a great American writer whose books had a small sale’ whether, like Sherwood Anderson, he could write copy ‘on the side’ to supplement his income. Though left anonymous by Woodward, this was certainly Sinclair Lewis, a good friend of the Woodwards who repeatedly asked Helen for a job and was eventually given one by her husband, Bill. Woodward’s response to his request, though, was: ‘You would write it beautifully, exquisitely indeed – but you would not want to make your reader do anything, or believe anything. You have none of the almost painful moral earnestness, which must go into the writing of advertising.’²⁵ So while Stein’s and Woodward’s advertisements may take a similar approach of looking past the mimetic description of goods, to instead ‘put a mood into words and transfer that mood to the reader’, there is a major difference in the authorial approach. As Woodward says, ‘To be a really good copywriter requires a passion for converting the other fellow, even if it is to something you don’t believe in yourself. [...] This is an emotion in itself and has little to do with its object.’²⁶ Woodward argues that for copywriters the object is not the product, but the reader, and conversion is the only goal in conveying atmosphere, mood or emotion. And because neither the author nor the product form the core of the discourse, anonymity is, for Woodward, a positive attribute for the copywriter: ‘*Anonymous* is a writer who can stand behind almost anything.’²⁷

It is clear that Stein, like Lewis in Woodward's opinion, lacks the focused objective of readerly conversion, neither catering to the whims of her public nor promoting her product. It has also been made clear that Stein, in taking up the task of conveying a mood or an emotion, is robbed of the discourse of anonymity that makes Woodward's 'passion for converting the other fellow' palatable. Her 'Advertisements' were produced under the imprimatur of Gertrude Stein, recent author of the widely-discussed *Tender Buttons*, and could not be read other than as the experimental prose of a misunderstood genius or mad woman, depending on her audience.²⁸ In fact, Stein's reputation often got in the way of her work's open reception, as her own lengthy endeavour to be published in *The Atlantic Monthly* makes clear. The magazine, as publisher of some of the greatest American writers of the nineteenth century – including Henry James, whom Stein hoped to emulate – served as Stein's highest ambition, and her desire to appear in its pages is clear from her correspondence with its editorial staff. The problem was that *The Atlantic Monthly*, and particularly its readership, had changed dramatically from the time of the nineteenth-century literary greats. Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the magazine during the years Stein was involved with it, wrote a history of the magazine covering the half century before his time, and reveals the push (with which he is sympathetic) 'to reducing the gap between "high" and popular culture.' In particular, Sedgwick writes about the influence of MacGregor Jenkins, the advertising manager of the magazine with rising influence at the turn of the century, who 'expressed contempt for "Literature with a Large L," aesthetically self-conscious literature, excessively subtle or intellectual.' Henry James, Sedgwick reveals, was the very definition of this kind of writing for Jenkins.²⁹

So Stein pursues publication in the magazine largely based on what the periodical once was rather than to reach the public it had begun to target. From Stein's first submission to *The Atlantic Monthly*, for fourteen years, Sedgwick had to continually attempt to explain

that she either had the wrong audience, or was writing the wrong way to reach this audience. As early as 1919 (three years after ‘Advertisements’ and two years after ‘Egeria’), he writes to Stein, ‘Your poems, I am sorry to say, would be a picture puzzle to our readers. All who have not the key must find them baffling, and – alack! that key is known to very, very few.’³⁰ She wrote back to say, ‘During the war I met many and miscellaneous Americans, and I confess I was surprised to find how many knew my work and were interested,’ indicating her desire to reach a general audience, but also perhaps misjudging the ‘interest’ that had been generated from the wide publicity of her early work.³¹ Sedgwick, at least, is not convinced that there is an audience ready to give her work serious consideration: ‘Your letter however seems to show me that you misjudge our public. There is no literati or illuminati or cognoscenti or illustriissimi of any kind, who could agree upon interpretations of your poetry. More than this, you could not find a handful even of careful readers who would think that it was a serious effort.’³²

Sedgwick and Stein’s correspondence reveals more than simply a debate over American audiences, but is centred on fundamental disagreement over the role of the author and the place of literary modernism. Sedgwick repeatedly refers to ‘the key’ to understanding Stein, or the ‘interpretations’ of her poems that readers must agree on – as if the modernist author’s task was to hide meaning in a puzzle which the public had to work out. He urges her to accept that there is no public in *The Atlantic Monthly* who could ‘get’ her work, when Stein makes clear she is not writing to be ‘got’, but to make and to leave an impression on them. She would reply, ‘But I don’t misjudge your public. I am not interested in their being literati, etc. My work is legitimate literature and I amuse and interest myself in words as an expression of feeling as Shakespeare or any one else writing did. This is entirely in the spirit of all that is first class in American letters whether its newspapers, Walt Whitman or Henry James, or Poe.’³³ The conflation of newspapers, Shakespeare, and Henry James is

fascinating, and reveals, as Barbara Will has pointed out, that Stein is aware of the collapsing definitions of high literature and mass culture, just as Sedgwick was.³⁴ But in a little-noticed public interview with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Stein goes even further in trying to break down the division between the notional difficulty of modernist authors and the ordinary readers she targeted. She is quoted as saying:

Anyone can understand if they do not try to understand, [...] If they only will listen as they read a newspaper. [...] We must get away from the highbrow complex. [...] Why, the average advertisement is as unintelligent as anything I have ever written. No one says it is unintelligent. One accepts it!”³⁵

This readerly acceptance is all Stein is looking for in *The Atlantic Monthly* – allowing her subjective descriptions of foods, objects, places and experiences to be accepted not as the coded language of high literature, or the difficult labours of the celebrated ‘Gertrude Stein’ for which a key is required – but as an evocative conveyance of subjective ‘human experience’, as with the best advertising writing.

Interestingly, Sedgwick’s solution to the problem that Stein’s reputation as a difficult author prevented her from reaching the public of *The Atlantic Monthly* is one that, fourteen years later, would help her find that same public. Sedgwick proposes to publish Stein’s submission, not in the regular pages of the magazine, thus endorsed by its imprimatur, but in *The Contributor’s Club*, a forum invented by William Dean Howells when he edited the magazine, where work is left entirely anonymous, created ‘to introduce young writers and offer new venues for the old’.³⁶ Stein was willing, in fact eager, to pursue this experiment – hoping, in the words of Sedgwick, to ‘let The Atlantic’s public be the judge and jury.’³⁷ She

wanted nothing more than that, though by the time the suggestion was made she had offered the already-rejected work elsewhere, so the anonymous publication in the *Club* never happened. Stein would try again in 1924, this time submitting her 'Elucidation', itself a complexly-wrought text seeking to provide the kind of 'key' to her writing Sedgwick had requested. But this, too, continued the impressionistic heaping-up of images and phrases, most of them ungrammatical. In other words, even her explanation – her 'key' to inform the readers – was built on affect rather than intellect. But Sedgwick could not see this, and in his rejection letter, would write, 'I speak with assurance on behalf of our readers when I say that they would not be able, without considerably more help, to translate their sensuous impressions into intellectual terms.'³⁸ Sedgwick is still unwilling to see her literary work as anything but a high-modernist puzzle to be solved, when Stein wants no more than the chance to provide readers with what Sedgwick recognises as 'sensuous impressions'. And when the magazine editors requested she provide a 'key' that will clarify her 'key' in 'Elucidation', Stein – in a move that signals a changing tactic – has her partner Alice Toklas write a quick gloss on the text, an 'advertisement' to preface the work. Stein's handwriting – or her authorial imprimatur – is this time absent from the new text typed by her secretary, apart from the hand-scrawled 'Mr S. – Please read!' in the top right corner, affirming that the explanation is endorsed by Stein herself.³⁹

Toklas's intervention does not help, but does provide a fascinating preview of how Stein would crack the impasse, and find her way both before a wider public and into *The Atlantic Monthly*. As already mentioned, it was Stein's autobiography in 1933 that found her a popular audience, made her a bestseller, and ultimately confirmed her celebrity. But of course, it is not Stein's autobiography at all, but Toklas's. Stein, whose reputation rested upon her trademarked incomprehensible prose style, finally reaches her wider audience by fulfilling the public demand for details on her celebrity life story only as told through the

voice of her copywriter, the anonymous Alice B. Toklas. That no one (unless they had the ‘key’ to Stein’s salon) knew who Toklas was only helped to fuel speculation in the press – dozens of clippings asking and answering who was this intimate member of high modernist circles. But Stein, of course, also plays her own copywriter, promoting the Stein brand safely couched in her anonymity. In fact, when Stein had first written the autobiography, she sent it to her agent, William A. Bradley, as if it were Toklas’s work, without her own name attached. Bradley, seeking serial publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*, wisely followed the same course, thus bypassing Sedgwick’s defences put up against the codified difficulty of modernist imprimaturs. Similarly, the first American edition of the book did not list Stein on the cover, the binding or the title page, choosing to promote the book, not based on its imprimatur, but on word-of-mouth as to its content. The compromise – self-promotion and plain speaking offered to a wide audience, but only through tactics of anonymity and misdirection – reveals the power of the autobiographical format.

Autobiography as Personal Advertisement

But even before Stein wrote Alice’s memoirs, Helen Woodward published her own. While Stein’s autobiography is notable for its attempt to obscure her widely-publicised celebrity imprimatur so that her text itself might finally be read without prejudice, Woodward’s autobiography is notable for finally promoting herself as author of the authorless discourse she had been generating for decades and read by millions. To make the symmetry between these two women even more perfect, Woodward’s autobiography reveals that, the exact year Sedgwick is unwilling to accept Stein’s work while suggesting she try her work anonymously in the *Contributor’s Club* section of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Woodward’s own copywriting is published in that venerable magazine, in that same column, as an example of the heights of style being reached by modern copywriting. Copywriting, suggests the

anonymous 1919 *Atlantic Monthly* piece, is growing increasingly satisfying aesthetically, engaging the reader with beauty and human interest, encroaching on the territory previously held exclusively by the creative writer. Woodward's copy, from the advertisement for the collected works of Mark Twain (fig. 3), is quoted in full, with the commentary: 'Where in all of literature will you find more magnificent cadence or a greater atmosphere of loftiness?'

Woodward is not mentioned by name, as copywriters ought to remain anonymous – but the article takes pains to reveal that this tactic of anonymity serves its purpose: 'All about us Trade has usurped the cloak of Euterpe. 'T is a strange and potent camouflage, and one which those who love the muse and her eight sisters must find a striking aspect of



Fig 3: Woodward Advertisement, *New York Tribune*, Nov 11, 1917, p. 12.

the age, and interesting enough to be observed.⁴⁰ Woodward makes clear throughout her autobiography that commerce could – indeed should – dress up as art, just as we have seen Stein dressing her own writing as commerce.

But what is even more interesting, perhaps, than Woodward getting published in *The Atlantic Monthly* on the merit of her poetic copy, is her decision to leave the anonymous role of copywriter in order to take to the stage as named author. Leaving her job as an advertising executive in 1924, *Through Many Windows* (1926) is her first of many books laying claim to her own imprimatur. Woodward takes credit for her previously anonymous advertisements in this volume, including the Twain copy that won her coveted notice in the printed pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Even more importantly, she is able to express herself in describing the

success of her advertisements, to explain precisely how she managed to successfully create an experience for her readers that immerses them within the text rather than simply allowing a glance at the cover. She asserts that the experience and the agency of the writer of advertising copy is highly significant, asserting herself as personal author of the anonymous discourse. Woodward writes, 'Advertising people thought that a man had written the Mark Twain copy. But perhaps only a woman who had no sons could have found just this particular pleasure in writing these advertisements. Or perhaps only a girl who had spent a childhood in wishing herself a boy.'⁴¹ In a rare moment of revelation, a personal glimpse of the copywriter comes into focus, revealing Woodward's more personal investment in 'human interest' advertising. As Fisk suggests, 'Madison Avenue and modernism were secret sharers in another, more specific way: their tendency to define authorship by recognition and attribution', in this case with autobiography structuring the relationship of corporate authorship and anonymity to creative attribution and recognition of the role played in the production of the discourse.⁴² Woodward's advertisements – like Stein's of the same period – would not have met with such success without the personal circumstances and experiences of their author.

Both Stein and Woodward produced innovative techniques in looking beyond the realist description of objects. Stein, through her stylistic trademark, looked beyond the material object to explore the subjectivity of her own experience, calling attention to herself as author in the process. Woodward, through her anonymous copy, learned to look beyond the material object to explore instead the subjectivity of the reader's experience, calling attention to the needs of the public that the object might fulfil. But both finally opt to write autobiography, where the authorial subject is itself treated as object, where the personal becomes public. Woodward emerges from behind her cloak of anonymity, a copywriter taking credit for her authorship through autobiography. In contrast, Stein retreats into anonymity in order to better promote her writing, asking to be read not under her own

imprimatur, but that of her copywriter, Toklas. Stein, as she claimed, not in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly* but in the dense columns of a mass-circulation newspaper, wanted to get away from the ‘highbrow complex’, wondering why her work could not reach the same public as that of the advertising copy she was repeatedly credited with influencing.

Notes

¹ Lewis Gannett, ‘Gertrude Stein and Advertising English’, NY Herald Tribune, 11/17/34, from the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (hereafter YCAL), MSS76, Box 7, folder 124.

² ‘Integer Vitae’, *New Statesman and Nation*, October 14, 1933, clipping from YCAL MSS 76, Box 6, Folder 118.

³ The title of chapter 3 in Helen Woodward, *Through Many Windows* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), p. 34.

⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* [1937] (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993), p. 292.

⁵ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Mark Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Sean Latham, *Am I a Snob? Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 20.

⁶ Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 8.

⁷ Alyson Tischler, ‘A Rose Is a Pose: Steinian Modernism and Mass Culture’ in *Journal of Modern Literature* 26:3/4 (Spring 2003), pp. 12-27.

⁸ Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography*, p. 232.

⁹ Ulla E. Dydo, with William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp. 618-19. For more on high culture and popular culture in poetic advertising see Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Gertrude Stein, ‘Plays’, originally published in *Lectures in America* (1935), reprinted in *Last Operas and Plays* (1949), ed. Carl Van Vechten (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. xxix – lii, p. xliv.

¹¹ Gertrude Stein, ‘Advertisements’ in *Geography and Plays* (Boston: Four Seas, 1922), pp. 341-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁵ Helen Woodward, ‘Egeria’ in *Postage: The Magazine of Direct Mail Advertising* 4:3 (April 1917) 226-8, p. 226.

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, ‘Advertising: the Magic System’ in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), 170-195, p. 180. See also Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) and Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994).

¹⁷ Woodward, *Through Many Windows*, p. 276.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

²⁰ Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 58.

²¹ Catherine L. Fisk, ‘The Modern Author at Work on Madison Avenue’ in Paul K. Saint-Amour (ed.), *Modernism and Copyright* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 173-94.

²² Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. 41-2.

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- ²³ Woodward, *Through Many Windows*, p. 263.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- ²⁷ Helen Woodward, *It's an Art* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 90. Italics in original.
- ²⁸ See Leonard Diepeveen on 'The Newspaper Response to *Tender Buttons*, and What It Might Mean' in Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (eds.), *Transatlantic Print Culture 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 199-215.
- ²⁹ Ellery Sedgwick, *A History of the Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 280.
- ³⁰ Sedgwick to Stein, 25 October 1919, Beinecke YCAL MSS76, Box 97, Folder 1825.
- ³¹ Stein to Sedgwick, undated, Beinecke YCAL MSS77, Box 15, Folder 245.
- ³² Sedgwick to Stein, 4 December 1919, Beinecke YCAL MSS76, Box 97, Folder 1825.
- ³³ Stein to Sedgwick, 2 January 1920, Beinecke, Gertrude Stein papers, YCAL MSS77, Box 15, Folder 245.
- ³⁴ Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of Genius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 135.
- ³⁵ O. R. Pilat, '30 Saints and Sea-Shell Scenery in Plotless Gertrude Stein Opera' in *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 29, 1934, pp. 1, 22; p. 22.
- ³⁶ Susan Goodman, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 142.
- ³⁷ Sedgwick to Stein, 4 December 1919, Beinecke YCAL MSS76, Box 97, Folder 1825.
- ³⁸ Sedgwick to Stein, 1 May 1924, Beinecke YCAL MSS76, Box 97, Folder 1825.
- ³⁹ Toklas to *Atlantic* editors, 11 April 1924, YCAL MSS77 Box 15 folder 246.
- ⁴⁰ Anon., 'Words that Sing to your Pocketbook', *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1919, pp. 572-75; p. 575. The article is reprinted in the Dartmouth alumni magazine, where it is attributed to John William Rogers, Jr.
- ⁴¹ Woodward, *Through Many Windows*, pp. 281-2.
- ⁴² Fisk, 'The Modern Author at Work', p. 180.