

## PARABOL: The Parabolic Loudspeaker at 3,14

### *If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso*

- Read by its Author, Gertrude Stein

(Written: 1923, Recorded: New York, Winter 1934-35)

**Interviewer:** *Your coming to the United States to lecture, Miss Stein, implies that there are many people who will be able to comprehend your ideas?*

**G.S.:** *Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking, putting it in other words. But I mean by understanding enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it. And lots of people have enjoyed it, so lots of people have understood it[...]. But after all you must enjoy my writing, and if you enjoy it you understand it. If you do not enjoy it, why do you make a fuss about it? There is the real answer.*

This excerpt from a radio interview from the same period as the recording of her reading her poem, *If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso*, shows Gertrude Stein answering a question in a manner similar to how she wrote. The use of a script cannot be ruled out, but, even then, the answer is still remarkable. This is so not only in what it says, but in the logical congruency of how she articulates herself. She asserts that to talk about her work we must break our habits of reading and interpretation, reconfiguring the mechanics of how we articulate ourselves. She exemplifies her attempt to do the same in her work, and her 'everyday' use of language is dragged along with this investment. The mediating force of language is the articulating constraint by which we are distanced and unified within ourselves. Gertrude has examined this mediator and managed to modulate certain functions, reformatting it. One might be tempted to see it as a playful dismemberment of language, but in participating in her work by reading it aloud, she reads it as it makes sense, because it does. Syntax provides the bare framework amongst which she can exemplify that one can thrust forward with few means. There is no drama and struggle for the microphone – there is no need. Her inspiring example is one of a revolt against oneself and the English language with which I am foolishly attempting to articulate myself here. Learning another language could be a firm first step for us – Gertrude was adept at French, German, and Spanish – giving as it does a peripheral, if not external, perspective on the idiosyncrasies of a particular tongue. From there we might think about intervening within our language's enabling captivity and our past uptake of language, of what 'history teaches'.

But what is it that history is teaching us? Why does it only teach? Let us put it another way: Can we recite what we learn from the past except through what we learned from the past? Perhaps the past is a constraint on us not listening to the recitation of history. What if we learn from history by treating it as an abstraction such as the sound of the words 'history teaches'.  
His story teaches  
His story tea chess

Hiss tore eat chess is storied each 's' is Tory...

The Conservative Party even finds its way into abstractions. This is worrying and something for which to make a fuss. If abstractions are coming concretions then let us extend the 'push-pull' further than that. Listen to language and then think then listen to language. We cannot wait for history to teach us for we can teach history to await us. We can wait on history to teach and wait. But not a weight on us can a history teach.

But you're mimicking.

I know not of what you are talking, stop making a fuss.

Is the spirit of Stein speaking through you?

No

Are you speaking through the spirit of Her Steinness?

(Silence)

Shamanism is a big part of education you know.

Now look here now. Having others speak through you is puppetry, not shamanism. Shamanic practices proper would be something for education. Shamanism invokes spirits in the name of others. It is a mediating and abstracting force, bringing spirits to life previously unreachable, bridging and constructing a distance all at once. Language is a shamanistic practice you say? It is plausible. Let us think.

In this recording of history I think Gertrude Stein infers that moving to a consideration of formal abstraction – the sound rather than 'meaning' of language – may be a necessary initial reconfiguration for us to *think* beyond the teaching of 'history'.

But what for?

- Johnny Herbert, 2014.

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) has published novels, poetry and plays. As a psychology student, she worked on 'normal motor automatism', a phenomenon hypothesized as occurring when attention is divided between two simultaneous intelligent tasks, such as writing and speaking, but later rejected the idea with regards to language. Later, her home in Paris became a meeting point for artists and thinkers from many disciplines. She is regarded as highly important figure in literature. And probably is one.