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**Lew Welch And Theory Or How Reading Gertrude Stein Impacted On
A Beatnik Poet's (Views On) Poetry**

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For Joseph Kepecs

The poem is not the heart's cry
(Though it seems to be if you have craft enough)
The poem is made to carry the heart's cry

And only to carry it. And the cry is always the
Same. . . for all times and every place the
Same perceptions met a hundred times, or once.

The rest is exuberance.
The force left over after dealing with
An undemanding planet in a square time. . .

No more or less mysterious than the juicing
Of the glands. The need to skip a stone
Across that pond. To yell among high mountains.

You think you read for the heart's cry
But you do not. You read because no stone
Ever skips perfectly. Because that mountain

Always lets you down. Because no matter
How you yell the voice bounced back
Is flat. The words are puny.

The need for another world that always works right
Is the heart's exuberance.
We don't hide there. We spill over and

Make it
(RoB¹ 161).

This paper addresses the question of the relation between poetry and theory in the work of a poet – Lew Welch² – associated with a group – the Beats – not usually associated with theory. What led us to research the question was *How I Read Gertrude Stein*, Welch’s B.A. thesis on Gertrude Stein written in 1950 but not published until 1996. That Welch chose to write a study on Stein rather than write a creative thesis seemed to invite a reassessment of the significance of theorizing for that “generation” and to go on to see if Welch’s original critical effort had influenced his poetic creation.

What will first be offered here is the view that Welch found in Stein a non-theoretical theory which tallied with his own dual inclination to theorize and reach for simplicity. Bearing in mind that one of the meanings of “simple” is “not double,” we then wish to discuss the place of wholeness in Welch’s work since accounting for a whole, or a whole class of phenomena is the goal pursued by any theorizing. Thirdly, we intend to suggest that Welch found in Stein, a basis for the earth-consciousness so vivid in his writing, that consciousness itself resulting in the *joint* attention paid to the discrete and to the whole, to the parts that make up the structure and to the global structure.

A non-theoretical theory

One of the major points made by Stein on creation is the distinction she introduced between “entity” and “identity”. Creation, she argued, cannot be done by one conscious of himself while engaged in doing it. She put it in a famous “slogan,” – Welch’s word – “‘I am I not any longer when I see’ [(Henry James, GSW2 149) *HIRGS* 20].” So creation is “formulated” – Stein’s word for “theorized” or “rationalized” – as sight. And so is her “formulating.” In a chapter of his thesis entitled “Composition as Explanation,” Welch observes approvingly that “Stein’s compositional explanations [...] are almost always based upon something she has actually seen [...]. Very rarely does she conjecture or intuit her explanations [*HIRGS* 30].” One sees how, wittingly or unwittingly, Stein tapped the etymological link of “theory” with “observation,” “contemplation,” and “seeing.”

Explaining is part of what writing theory involves. In a letter to Gary Snyder dated Nov. 5th 1960, Welch says: "I've always been an explainer (*IR* II 16)." But the realization is a source of discomfort and self-doubt: are poetry and explaining compatible? "[W]ho am I to tell the poems how to talk? (*IR* II 16)." Conducted in straightforward language, Welch's analysis of Stein's style in her lectures is a plea for another kind of theory-writing or rather creating thinking-writing:

[t]he lectures are not written in the language of exposition or philosophy, but are written in simple language that defies one to turn it into terminology. 'I am I not any longer when I see' might be expressed by means of the term 'objectivity' but if you do so you run the risk of only bringing the confusion that accompanies this term to bear upon your discussion of a conscious state. One can very easily become so involved with terms, that what the terms have been used to convey becomes lost in a whelm of definitions [*HIRGS* 25-26].

Theory is usually a source of fresh terminology. Not introducing unnecessary terminology is one of Welch's priorities. In a letter to Charles Olson written in 1960, Welch referred to Stein and Williams as "our Buddhas (*IR* II 4)." The word that matters is "our." The attempt at setting down truths should be done without blurring the issues with Eastern - and therefore to the majority, fuzzy - notions or words: "to use yr. phrase, the 'breathing' must be ours. The gesture ours [...]. For this is how I know it and 'after all you can only tell what you know in the only way you know telling it [...].' I know (just as she³ did) that it's almost sure to interest everybody if done truly (*IR* II 5)." The character of "The Red Monk," whose voice provides a bottom-of-the-page commentary on the main speaker's words in a number of Welch's poems and who sometimes takes over entirely to deliver a "sermon" (*RoB* 29) materializes that distance Welch deemed it necessary to keep alongside any vital interest in Eastern thinking⁴. His commentaries often take a humorous turn: the one on "Leo's Poet-Plight", a poem on the aggravating encroachment of one's person's claims to attention upon the poetic voice, which culminates in an exasperated: "HOW CAN I LEARN TO GET OUT OF MY WAY?" takes the form of a brief question and answer: "*Who ever wanted to get out of his way?/ Ask him [RoB 191].*" Welch's use of riddles

may certainly also point to a way of short-circuiting Western expository writing and to faster Eastern ways to the more general. The fact, however, that they are surrounded with 'stricter-than-thou' assertions of earnestness and that answers are nowhere to be found, suggests playfulness on the author's part.

For all the distrust of abstruse terminology it displays, Welch's previously quoted sentence - "you can only tell what you know in the only way you know telling it" - does not question the centrality of knowing. In his 1971 talk "How I Work as a Poet," given a few months before his death, Welch was saying: "Gertrude Stein [...] said something that I think is very beautiful: 'The most delightful state of achievement or state of mind is to know yourself knowing something (*HIWAAP* 52).'" The poem heading this article - "For Joseph Kepecs" -, written in 1957, bespeaks Welch's taste for explanatory statements on the subject of poetry, in this case an almost biological account of its existence⁵.

Conversely, despite the theorizing inclination, simplicity - also a Steinian concern not always easy to grasp ⁶ - always stayed a priority with Welch. He certainly would not minimize the difficulty encountered when reading Stein but argued that much of the difficulty comes from one's inability to "learn to be simple enough to accept the fact that she means what she says, and that she says it as simply as it can be said (*HIRGS* 147)."

In a letter to Philip Whalen dated July 7th 1957, Welch pursues the matter of simplicity on a much broadened scope: "I have carefully examined all poetry known to me. It is astonishing how the great ones are all alike in their almost agony of plainness. People who know Homer tell me he writes like people ordering cabbages [...]." Welch must be on his way there since he has found that "[t]he only people that like my writing are either absolutely untutored in poetry, or of the highest sophistication. Those in between all tell me it's prose (*IR* I 106)."⁸

Imperceptibly, one has drifted from considerations on terminology in exposition to Welch's poetic diction, from theory to practice. The blurring of the line separating theory from practice is a feature of Stein's work isolated and to some extent imbibed by Welch. "Stein's use of the 'being' tense of the verb is very

noticeable," he observes, and goes on to account for this prominence by her reluctance – this is Welch quoting Stein – “to make a whole thing present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out” even though she felt the desire to express the general view which had been arrived at. This again is Welch quoting Stein: “‘but it was a whole there then within me and as such it had to be said (*Gradual, Lectures in America* 147)’ (*HIRGS* 18).” It is not therefore indifferent that what the above quotations from Gertrude Stein refer to should not be a piece of expository writing but *The Making of Americans*, a novel. Welch rightly points out that Stein’s characterization is – both in that particular book and in her early portraits – “an abstraction of the ‘characterization’ which might have been expressed by having the character reveal himself by his actions, but we do not have the character revealing himself by his actions, instead we have only that essence, that ‘being,’ which might have been so revealed (*HIRGS* 19).” So the distance between fiction and abstraction, between practice and theory, is much reduced as part of the design of theory *is* to generalize and abstract. Stein’s, Welch says, is “writing that is at once an elucidation of the subject and a demonstration of the points she attempts to make ((*HIRGS* 20).” It is theory in the making, like Welch’s “For Joseph Kepecs.”

Making does not stop there. The generalizing of ‘theory’ is overridden, taken over by those that generalizations are being made about. Out goes the lone theorist, in come the many theorized. Stein’s preference for simple words, Welch argues, does not mean she is deluding herself about most people’s abilities to realize the complex implications of her words but makes her creating thinking a greater incentive to ‘make-it-yourself’ than would regular expository writing. “She talks as if everyone in her audience ‘knew’ as much as she does, because she really believes that they do [*HIRGS* 27].” Welch talks of “the gratifying compliment” of Stein’s lectures in being stated as they are, as they get us to feel “as if we had her intelligence and her background [*HIRGS* 27].” Hence the “kind of identification between yourself and Stein [*HIRGS* 27].” She relinquishes her author-ity and Welch’s goal of plainness in his poetry seems in turn to issue from one desirous to minimize his authorial presence.

The theoretical intent is inseparable from a wish to endure, to outdo the flow of process – even when it is flux which is being theorized – and to contain the lushness of reality. Stein would go about it differently. “This is a fluid book,” Welch concludes about *The Making of Americans*. He started out by summarizing the book thus:

The idea, a simple one, and partly known to most of us, is [this]: there are a great many people in the world, they are knowable, they are like all other people, like no other person, like some other people. [...]. It takes her almost one thousand pages and three years of steady thinking to fully realize that she ‘has’ the above conception of human beings. But when she gets it[,] it is not the glib formulation that appears above. It is huge and all-embracing (*HIRGS* 50).

Process is never lost sight of. Stein’s non-standard non-glib theorizing did much to blur the line between theory and creating and she paved the way for later experiments with theory-writing, be it by Charles Olson or by Language poets. Welch pioneered the re-discovery of Stein’s usefulness.

Partiality to wholes

Welch’s positive response to Stein’s comprehensive, all-encompassing vision in *The Making of Americans* was coming from one to whom a non-excluding logic made all the sense in the world, literally and metaphorically. “The reader’s joy is that of Stein’s as this great theme becomes realized (*HIRGS* 60).” Again and again, the same penchant for dismissing incompatibility and integrating seeming incompatibles into broader, overall views, reasserted itself in his writings. For example, while keeping in sharp focus Williams’s imperative to be attentive to spoken language, Welch, in a letter to Philip Whalen, claimed the right to not let oneself be enslaved by ‘real language:’

(this to answer the ‘American English’ kick you mentioned – yes, but after studying it I know that it must, certainly, be the source, but after all poetry is real artificial and the *illusion* of the native speech is all we need to do). Do I have to throw away a thousand years of complicated words because some fishmonger says something that way? No! But if I don’t listen real careful I’m likely to take all the

guts out and write like POPE! What I want is both. The precision and the puns and the fancy rhymes and the simple surprise of real language telling something (IR I 93)."

One will, in passing, not have failed to notice either that the previously-mentioned precedence of sight over hearing is here challenged. We will return to the subject later. Equally non-excluding is the inscription preceding the preface to his collected works – "To the memory of Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams" – how easy is it to claim that dual ascent? – below which is a first poem also emphasizing seamlessness:

I WANT THE WHOLE THING, the moment
when what we thought was rock, or
sea
became clear Mind, and

what we thought was clearest Mind really
was that glancing girl, that
swirl of birds. . .

(all of that)

AND AT THE SAME TIME that very poem/
pasted in the florist's window [...]
(RoB iii).

We have seen how Stein was all the more precious to Welch since she never obstructed the "expression [of her writing] by superimposing an organization upon it [HIRGS 23]." But he was nonetheless sensitive to the epic-like totalizing construction of *The Making of Americans*: "[h]er gradual kind of structural building has the same, or analogous, way of seeming 'dignified' and 'measured' as does the writing in *Paradise Lost* (HIRGS 62)." He could tell good builder's work when he saw some and kept following suit.

He organized *Ring of Bone*, his collected poems that were to have been published in 1970, into a coherent set, writing a preface to it to explain the book's guiding principles. That preface starts:

"I. *The Structure*[/] This book is organized into a structure composed of individual poems, where the poems act

somewhat like chapters in a novel. The poems are autobiographical lyrics and the way they are linked together tells a story [...]. I first became struck by the usefulness of such a form through a close study of Yeats's *The Tower* [RoB 3]."

The whole also determined the parts: "I have also written new poems for the purpose of filling gaps in the story, so any poem may have been written at any time or not [RoB 3]." Twenty years earlier, as a student at Reed, Welch had put together for William Carlos Williams who was coming for a reading, a booklet entitled "Poems and Remarks." It too aimed at self-containment and included an exposition of the rationale of its form:

[b]ecause most of these poems are not strong enough to stand, interestingly, alone, I have included remarks which are intended, not to clarify, but to show what problems of the craft of writing were being struggled with at the time of composition. I consider these poems to be the record of a trial and error process through which I hope to discover a way of telling a thing that is both natural to me and intense enough to be called poetry (IR I 27).

Quite characteristically in the same "Poems and Remarks", two Eastern pieces of wisdom are turned into stages within a dialectical view of a (male) artist's progress from exclusive focus on content to exclusive focus on form, finally on to the crowning and harmonious integrating of the two. Though she is not named, Stein is fitted into the picture as the second Cubist-sounding necessary stage to be gone through during which the artist comes to consider a woman's body of flesh and blood "as the complex relationship of conical and cylindrical forms (IRI 39)." "She has ceased to be a woman," Welch comments, "but he has started to be an artist." The third stage, unlike ether-directed "Plato's ladder of development (IRI 39)," brings the woman "back into his [the painter's] carefully related forms. Back to earth (IRI 39)."

Welch oscillated between or juggled his taste and flair for theorized sharply-defined organizing wholes and more organic ones such as self⁹, lifetime, planet¹⁰.

"I wish that I had spoken only of it all," Stein wrote in *Stanzas in Meditation* (GSWII 135)." And the priority of wholeness over fragmentation is found in her

writing at other scales than that of a complete work. Her praise of the paragraph, for instance, resonated with Welch's inclination to wholeness: "Gertie always said our greatest formal thing was that we wrote in blocks, paragraphs, etc. and *not* in phrases as the 19th century – you have to have the beauty of it whole)," he wrote to Williams in 1951 (*IRI* 59). Some of his prose-looking pieces are thus made up of paragraph-like stanzas or rather stanza-paragraphs¹¹. But attaining wholeness is no walk in the park.

A whole with a hole in it – a Zen-like concept in its contradictoriness – is what "I saw myself," the poem from which Welch took the title of his collected work is about (*RoB* 77):

I saw myself
a ring of bone
in the clear stream
of all of it

and vowed,
always to be open to it
that all of it
might flow through

and then heard
"ring of bone" where
ring is what a
bell does.

Again, "theorein" – "I *saw* myself" – is at work here but much else too. The contradictory content in the vision is that oneness is achieved through the hollowness/ emptiness of him, synechdochied into one of his bones – one pictures a vertebra – prior to his sheer vanishing into sound. Only a sound is left, all that is left is all, the sound of the whole, sound of a hole, like a shamanistic – i.e. by one said to have the ability to extend proprioception to the skeleton – version of Donne's "For whom the bell tolls/ it tolls for thee." The letter to Duncan in which Welch wrote a first fragmented version of the poem was never sent. Its content comes very close to a theory of what poetry is "all about" in Welch's view and, in ours, may owe something to Stein. For in it, Welch explains how being a poet involves diving into the river – "the clear stream/ of all of it" – and letting it flow through you. Being able

to let it flow through you is the poet's special madness but also a matter of life and death:

And I found that whatever it is that chooses to flow through me is so powerful it will destroy me if I resist it *in any way*. That I must open to it or die. And the death will be suicide.

I opened to it 2 days ago, here, at Ferlinghetti's Big Sur cabin, after being alone for 5 days [...]. And I got the most radiant vision of openness. I saw how this was all meaning. That I was only a mess of gates. That having Human Being is to have many many gates, that it *all* flow through.

That it was all right, too, that we have a Self. That it *all* be transformed. Different on the way out [...] (*IR II 52*).

Pulling all the stops of the Self results in what Welch calls "writing down," "almost getting to a plainness that obviates all poetry (*IRII 53*)." Welch was concerned with simplicity but he was also concerned by simplicity as it might come to the painful termination of writing.

To revert to the traumatic and illuminating experiencing of the whole, Welch wrote further: "After the radiant vision of openness, yesterday, I saw myself a ring of bone in a clear stream, and vowed never, never, to close myself again./ But can I do it? Will it always hurt this much? What is it that hurts? [...] Will closing rest me?" He wonders whether the phrase could account for the experience. Welch looks at such a "black satori (*IRII 53*)" as the occupational hazard in the poet's trade. In a letter to his mother written in the same month as the letter to Duncan, we find this view worded in its most striking form: "[b]reakdowns for others are breakthroughs for the Poet. It is one of our major jobs (*IRII 51*)¹²." How Steinian is all of the above?

"[F]rom Stein's difficult writing," Welch wrote, "we can learn to depersonalize ourselves when we look at a work of art (*HIRGS 14*)." Ground common to Stein and Zen is the erosion of one's self and the one might say concomitant wish to embrace "it all", perceive, think, and write in terms of the whole. May one say there was a gradual switch from the reduction of one's self to doing away with oneself? Welch took his own life in 1971. The inclination can first be observed in 1960 as Welch has started work on what in a letter to Ginsberg he calls "a HUGE novel about everything

(IRI 178).” In a letter to Philip Whalen, dated four days later, as he has been working on a teletype roll, Kerouac-fashion, he remarks: “[o]ne beautiful thing is happening. I haven’t written about Leo for nearly 11 feet. Just other people. It may be the perfect autobiography: everybody in the world there except me – I, Leo, supply the eyes and words only, always there though – thus supplying the accidental presence. Mom says why not call it: ‘*Eye, Leo*’? (IRI 180).” Another four days and in a letter to Gary Snyder, Welch comes to the conclusion that he will only be able to relate to women after “getting Lew Welch all empty and gone. I am sick of him. He is weak, romantic, oversensitive to others, afraid, wordy, ashamed, unemployable, and vain. Not only that, he dreams and hopes. Therefore I haven’t invented “Leo,” a character who does all these things with a forced flair – it is fun being Leo, and ridiculous.” In the same letter, the book is referred to as “a huge autobiography called ‘I, Leo’ which Jack says I ought to call ‘The Whole United States.’ [...]It might be a good book. Leo is slowly dropping out of it, it is slowly becoming little shots of everybody (IR I 182).” The paradoxical notion of a non-personal autobiography is assuredly Steinian¹³: one may see too how it mingles with darker overtones. Later that Spring, Zen affords Welch a new brighter take on the question of “person:” “Enlightenment, as I see it, is a process whereby a person gradually resigns from the world that is man, and thereby becomes a member of the world that is not man. [...] No oversoul, no greater self. Nothing. A revelation of discontinuity. A total resignation where one resigns to nothing and finds that nothing is perfect – PERFECT! ! (IRI 196).” To Philip Whalen, in yet another letter written in 1960, Welch states: “I go on writing. But you are perfectly right about how nice it would be if I could only get out of the way ((IRI 211).” In 1963, after the publishing of *Big Sur*, Welch writes to Kerouac that he has no hard feelings about the character representing him in the novel: “Say whatever you like about Lew Welch. I am tired of him. I spend most of my time trying to rid my original face of Lew Welch but he keeps hanging around inside me and fucking everything up. He is no friend of mine (IRII 101).” Or “HOW CAN I LEARN TO GET OUT OF MY WAY? (RoB 191).”

Welch's early Steinian influences debunking the centrality of the person may have mingled over the years with Zen's requirement of self-effacement and erasure of the personal. Conjoined with the mental and physical distress Welch went through, those teachings may have played a part in the rational-sounding decision to erase the person. In this case, theory is preparation¹⁴.

But one cannot stop there. In a letter to James Wilson about the poem "Wobbly Rock," Welch says that while he was writing it, "'unwobbling pivot' was on my mind (IRI 195). "Contradictoriness" is a defining characteristic of Zen (Blyth 206-213) and a frequent surface feature of Gertrude Stein's work (Alfandary 108). One should of course acknowledge that the two aforementioned phrases generate a different range of meanings. "Unwobbling pivot" suggests steadfastness in movement while "wobbly rock" is received as weakness associated with solidity and therefore lesser solidity. What Welch writes about the rock on Muir Beach - "Notched to certain center it/ Yields and then comes back to it (RoB 54) -" indicates that he was *not* after the frozen stillness of an immutable centre: one should just allow for the oscillations causing it to quake. Stein, with her massive attacks on the impositions of meaning and sense conducted with impressive consistency, appears as such a "Wobbly Rock" figure, in which solidity ultimately outweighs fragility. No matter how much imbalance she introduces in a given work, control is always retained with a firm hand. Un-wobbly Stein.

Stein: Welch's role-model as accurate writer of microcosms and the macrocosm ?

Indeed, far from being just a disembodied influence through the abstractness of her writings, Stein also provided Welch with much that he needed to keep going.

He liked her cheerfulness and ends a chapter of his thesis praising her passion for the twentieth century, quoting the "Epilogue" of her *Picasso*, obviously in complete agreement with Stein's assessment of Picasso's contemporariness through the new point of view on the earth he intuited: Picasso's cubism is validated by the view of the earth seen from an airplane:

'When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the

earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves, I saw the simple solutions of Braque, I saw the wandering lines of Masson, yes I saw and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it, but he is contemporary and as the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had (*Picasso, GSW 533*)' [HIRGS 39].'

Welch's own earth-as-planet awareness was acute. "He Begins To Recount His Adventures", a prose poem, starts: "I can't remember seeing it any other way but whole, a big round rock wheeling about the heavens [...]. Everything about it always seemed right. The roundness is right. The way it spins. (*RoB 94*)."

This time, the recurring hole into the whole is evoked in a joyful and playful mode. The speaker imagines a happy *China Syndrome* scenario, vaguely looking like a reversal of the fate that befell Satan in Dante's *Divine Comedy* since the stay at the core of the earth would be self-willed: "Suppose you dug a tunnel all the way to China and then jumped into the hole. You'd fall down through the centre, and then fall up - almost to the other side. Then you'd fall back down again, up again, down again, each time losing a little distance till finally you'd be hanging there, exactly in the middle - the only place in the world where every place was up." This makes one see as meaningful the fact that Welch's thesis' final sentence should be a quote from *Everybody's Autobiography* linking inevitability, acceptance, the roundness of the earth and his wish to capture Stein's message in its entirety: "You might say that Stein's whole 'message' is: ... 'the earth is round, and even airplanes have to come back to it (*EA 123*).'" *The World Is Round* published one year after *Picasso*, was the title Stein gave to a children's book in which that characteristic of our planet is in turn celebrated and wondered at.

Halfway into "He Begins To Recount His Adventures", the focus shifts to microcosms, with the same sense of wonder: "Everything is right, clear down to the smallest parts of it." In "Springtime in the Rockies, Lichen (*RoB 131*)," the speaker

asks: “why am I made to/ kneel and peer at Tiny?¹⁵” Though not a nature writer, Stein too peered at “Tiny,” only in other fields. See *How to Write* for the experimenting with particles of sound and grammar. Some of Stein’s writings have been described as pre-transformational. Welch was altogether taken by her method. He studied structural linguistics himself at the University of Chicago and would refer to his poems in his correspondence as “utterances.” So the scientist’s accuracy appealed to Welch: that much is clear from the previously quoted description to Williams of how he went about improving his writing. His trial-and-error method was probably self-devised but he would have felt close kinship with one whose writing he felt can be matched against experience. He underlines the verifiable quality of her ‘in-sights:’ “[e]ach rereading calls to mind more and more verifying experiences, for the experiences between readings have been, in the interim, tested by using her approach, the approach of asking what a thing *is* not what it might mean, of noticing what you see, before looking ‘behind’ it (*HIRGS* 27).” He valued the precision of her phenomenological approach to language and reality.

For Stein’s writing is anything but blurred at the edges. She was the ideal role-model in this respect for one who had axes to grind with “those bastards in the 19th century. The century when all the edges blurred (*IRI* 45).” Welch as critic of his closest friends in the trade – Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen – appears as exacting in his demand for clarity. “[A]mbiguity be damned,” he tells Snyder, adding about the poem the latter sent him: “To my mind the strongest lines [...] are the lines in which the grammar of the language is most explicit (*IRI* 62).”

But he liked the fact that Stein had wanted it both ways, would not choose between the whole and the discrete. “In order to give the writing a fair trial,” Welch writes about the huge *The Making of Americans*, “one must read it [...] as if he were proofreading [...] [T]he sentences become more and more dependent upon minute variations in the rhythms and vocabulary [*HIRGS* 61).” His poem “Prepositions (*RoB* 206),” meant to be comprised of nothing but prepositions¹⁶, reads as a response to Stein’s praise of usually bypassed categories of words:

[A]nyone can see that verbs and adverbs are more interesting than nouns and adjectives [...]. Prepositions

can live one long life being really being nothing but absolutely nothing but mistaken and that makes them irritating if you feel that way about mistakes but certainly something that you can be continuously using and everlastingly enjoying. I like prepositions the best of all [...] (GSII 315).

More purposeful striving for both accuracy and unity can be observed in Welch's declaration of intent as the young editor of Reed College's poetry magazine, a job which he viewed as calling for aims clearly set out and which placed him in a position to enforce his poetic authority: "We shall treat literature as a craft which can be learned and talked about – the mystic, mysterious, soul-rending bullshit which we have inherited from the least of centuries, the 19th, have confused the 20th until student writing is either derivative or hysterical. [...] I shall be a tyrant, if it is at all possible, and thus achieve, at least, a unity (*IR I: 9*)."

If sight was Stein's and Welch's own preferred access to the whole, hearing may to a certain extent appear as their favorite channel into the discrete. Welch had heard Williams's lesson: "We talk American, and the poet's job is to intensify this dialect, sharpen it into poetry, keep the things clean and sharp, and MAKE things out of them. And my, he is right. One hears the language of conversation in a wholly different way after reading him. Words become lively, and poetry unaffected. It was a jam session (*IRI 41*)," writes Welch to his mother following "the great man's" [Welch's words] visit to Reed. That lesson chimed in with another of the lessons learnt from Stein: the attention paid to people's actual talking. "You'll remember," he writes to Philip Whalen, "that when I was studying Stein I got to be good at listening to my talking and the talking around me. When I went to New York it became an obsession. The rattle of those little words had force and dignity and every once in a while a fresh kind of beauty [...] (*IRI 100*)." Later in life as an executive in advertising, Welch was to come up with the world-famous slogan "Raid Kills Bugs Dead," putting "those little words" to use for maximum impact. An advertiser's copy being meant to be seen *and* heard, Welch may well have kept in mind such Stein dictum-like statements as: "Writing may be made between the ear and the eye and the ear and the eye the eye will be well and the ear will be well (*HTW 277*)¹⁷." One gains a better

understanding of many of Welch's poems by looking at them¹⁸. At readings, Welch would sing some of his poems - a musical score of "Supermarket Song" is included in *Ring of Bone* (RoB 102). No matter the channel, one clearly senses the distinctive wish not to give up on any part of the whole. A review of one of Welch's San Francisco performances confirms this: "He whistles, chants, improvises, weeps, croons - he is totally involved [...] (IRII 141)."

Why not mention that Stein's long favorite brother was called Leo? Lew Welch certainly shows brotherly feelings for the one he often calls "Gertie." Having come across her work by accident¹⁹ and been spell-bound by it, Welch never went back. Are not the two of them humorists of a kind²⁰? Stein's writings were often the butt of journalists' or fellow-writers' jokes,²¹ but did she not out-humor them in a lot of ways? Take this passage which unsurprisingly Welch comments on in his thesis: "Howard means nothing nothing at all in adding in in in English. She has sneezed (HTW 70)²²." She found her seemingly referent-less tall tales in everyday language stutterings.

At the time Welch decided to write his thesis on Stein, no one at Reed College "had even read her, much less studied her writings and her approach to them (IRI 7)." He was nevertheless encouraged to go ahead with his plan²³. The former neglect or rejection of Gertrude Stein was proven wrong by Welch: among the first enthusiastic readers of the thesis was William Carlos Williams. Directions subsequently taken by American poetry proved Welch right in other respects too. He was naturally signifier-centered: "'Almost as far back as I can remember, I was hearing structures (Meltzer 217)' (Shaffer *viii*)." He can be seen as a bridge between the Beats and Language. He had an eye and an ear for form, prophesying - as the reviewer of Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* - that "[p]erhaps, when we are very old, people will write "Brautigans," just as we now write novels [...] For this man has invented a genre (HIWAAP 22)." Sound came first for Welch as he wrote to Robert Duncan in July 1962: "my Writing: where I always hear the music just before I find the words that sing it (IR II 52)." But would not go the whole lyrical hog without circumspection: "[a]m WRITING again. Many new poems. [...] Very musical. I am

accepting the Irish sounds, the pretty ones (*IRII* 61).” He is also a precursor nature-poet of planet Earth. We have seen how reading Stein may have led Welch to rationalize and strengthen these inclinations.

Five years before he took his own life or rather left a farewell note and was never seen again, Welch mentioned being at work on “a book called ‘I Remain,’ consisting of letters I send to friends (*IRII* 138),” as if in reply to some untimely calling into question of his ‘permanence’. I wonder if the title comes from the opening lines of Stein’s last “Stanza in Meditation”: “Why am I if I am uncertain reasons may inclose/ Remain remain propose repose chose (*GSWII* 145).” Is the second line to be read as a series of injunctions or as shorthand for “I remain, I remain, I propose and chose repose?”

Stein was for Welch a constant companion. One of his later poems has this brief section which may summarize his writing-life-long gratefulness:

“and will not be alone” means

*Each one is one.
There are many of them.*

(Gertrude Stein, *RoB*, 196).

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NOTES

¹ The following abbreviations are used:

- Works by Lew Welch: *HIRGS*, *How I Read Gertrude Stein*; *HIWAAP*, *How I Work As A Poet*; *I,L*, *I, Leo*; *IR I*, *I Remain I*; *IR II*, *I Remain II*; *RoB*. *Ring of Bone*;
- Works by Gertrude Stein: *EA*, *Everybody's Autobiography*; *HTW*, *How to Write*; *GSW1*, *Writings 1903-1932*; *GSW2*, *Writings 1932-1946*.

² Just as Gary Snyder – alias Japhy Ryder – was a central figure in Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, Welch (1926-1971) – alias Dave Wain – shares the limelight with the narrator in another of the Legend of Duluo novels, *Big Sur*. He went to college at Reed, befriending Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen while there. In the early nineteen-sixties, he became a bit of a living legend on the San Francisco poetry-reading scene for his flamboyant performances as a reader and singer of his own work. He appears as an iconic figure of the times, since he made a detour via the heart of America’s consumer society. For several years, he was a high-flying executive in advertising in Chicago, and after he lost interest in the job and the job itself, made his living from a variety of occupations, from taxi-driver to salmon-fisherman, living a hermit’s life in the mountains whenever he felt the need to do so or had to do so when the money ran out.

³ “She” is Gertrude Stein.

⁴ See Ray DiPalma’s « Annotations Tropes And Lacunae Of The Itoku Master » (1991, unpaginated) for a double distancing from Eastern material among poets of the next generation.

⁵ Welch who had seen a psychoanalyst to combat depression, thought highly of Freud’s writings – “Freud by the way had some amazing insights. Understatement number 12a (IRI 48)” : he had that interesting take on art and so poetry, as protectors of waking life and therefore as daytime counterparts to dreams, which, in Freud’s view, “are a device for protecting sleep (IRI 83.)” It was, he believed, the artist’s keener alertness that enabled him/her to tap and release those protective mechanisms at will.

⁶ In her attack on commas, she writes about « the pleasure of concentrating on the final simplicity of excessive complication (« Poetry and Grammar », GSWII 320).

⁷ See also p.61.

⁸ Simplicity is one of the eleven headings under which Zen – as “the state of mind for haiku” – is dealt with in R.H. Blyth’s *Eastern Culture*, the introductory volume to his haiku anthology first printed in 1949 which was so influential among American poets. Understandably, these notions garner limited acceptance in critical discourse as they seem to negate it. One should therefore delve into Welch’s more prose-looking poetry and work out the devices its deceptive simplicity is engendered by, making it poetry rather than prose. In fact, the reader-friendliness of Welch’s writing partly comes from the use or disuse in it of tricks of the trade: non-enigmatic titles, general avoidance of metaphors and of high seriousness. See Marjorie Perloff’s analysis of A. Ginsberg’s “Howl” for similar conclusions on Beatnik non-naïve spontaneity.

⁹ See the “Leo Poems” section, in particular “Song of a Self” (*RoB* 28).

¹⁰ Even when wholes would not hold, Welch would not let go of cogency. The posthumous section of *Ring of Bone* – with all of Welch’s “Uncollected Poems” – itself comprised of different sections, ends on one prepared by Welch for publication and to which he wrote a preface. It reads: “[a]ll of my previous books were structures so that each poem nourished, and was nourished by, the others. This book is not like that. It is a wasted field in which, like blocks of cement, the wreckage of my mind is scattered (*RoB* 208).” But the book was to be entitled *Cement*.

¹¹ The circle can be seen as further evidence of this holistic partiality. Stein, like Welch, valued rings: “When I said./ A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose./ And then later made that into a ring I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caresses and addressed a noun (“Poetry and Grammar”, GSWII 327).” See Welch’s “Circle Poems” and “Large Little Circle” (*RoB* 32-33 & 159).

¹² The same notion of necessary but dicey work in the tackling of wholeness is found in “He Locates The Live Museum:” It opens on the conclusion that “[f]inally there’s no room for it

all." "Has anybody ever said, out loud, that our job is to give ourselves/ away? That now and then we must have rest from that work? (RoB 92)."

¹³ From *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* to *The Geographical History of America*, especially pp. 448-458 or *Everybody's Autobiography*.

¹⁴ Suicide is mentioned explicitly in the letter to Robert Duncan previously referred to. Quoting Mayakovsky's suicide note, Welch catalogues all the ones in the trade that took their own lives, concluding: "These suicides are but a part of the job of Poet!/ For whatever it is that hurts. Whatever it is that needs to rest from time to time./ Whatever it is that can be opened to the flow of it, or closed from pain (IR II 55)."

¹⁵ It would seem there is a Californian literary tradition of outdoor observation and celebration of the tiny. Eleni Sikelianos - the tradition's most recent exponent in *The California Poem* has acknowledged her debt to Steinbeck, a pioneer in such writing., which can also be found in Gary Snyder's and Lew Welch's work. Writes Welch: "[c]oncern for minute things/ gives scale to all this size (IRII 58)." But there is more to it. "'Facing West from California's shores" is the land of haiku. Further east is the old west: who better than Sikelianos, a poet of Greek ascent, can rejuvenate on California's shores a kinship of letters with atoms which dates back to Democritus?

¹⁶ But actually including a few adverbs too!

¹⁷ Within the confines of hearing, that same search for balance between the parts and the whole was present in Welch's aesthetics: "[I]n my poetry, I've tried to keep the din while being accurate to the pose of mind that lets us know what's what (IRII 140)."

¹⁸ They sometimes include visuals ; see RoB 72, 102 & 110.

¹⁹ The accident appears in *I, Leo*: "Leo was called to Art one day, three years before this narrative, in the office of his good friend and first real shattering teacher, Ray Nelson. What happened was, Nelson was not in his office and while he waited Leo began to read *Melanctha* by Gertrude Stein. When Nelson finally did show up, Leo simply said hello, borrowed the book, and left. He was never the same again (I,L 70)."

²⁰ Kerouac's *Big Sur* gives the reader great samples of Wain alias Welch's quirky sense of humor and ecological panics (pp. 52-53 and 57-58 respectively. He is described as "one of the world's best talkers, and funny too (2)."

²¹ Our thanks to Marc Chénétier for calling to our attention Thurber's « There's an Owl in My Room » in which the author derides Stein's writing , using her pages on pigeons in *Geographical History of America* (GSVII 412-413) as a starting point/ launching pad and writing himself a wonderful "prose ode against pigeons" in the process. Interestingly, Welch stood up for Gertie in a sense for he too wrote two poems on pigeons (RoB 62, 215). It is not doubtful that Welch intended to repay Thurber in kind in a humorous way by writing a realistic sequel to Stein's pages.

That Welch's poem is a sequel is obvious. Compare Stein's "Then the pigeon almost falls off because suddenly there is another pigeon there and the pigeon had not believed it possible for another pigeon to be there (GSVII 412)" with Welch's "A bad winter./ birds, even,/ dropped from those fake/ medieval eaves:// frozen pigeons!// They were there, on the ground!" (RoB 215).

²² Welch points out "[t]he entertainment value of the "verbal playfulness" in *How to Write* (HIRGS 3)."

²³ See pp. vi-xii of Eric Paul Shaffer's "Introduction" to *How I Read Gertrude Stein*. Shaffer wrote his dissertation - *All Come to This* (1991) - on Lew Welch and William Carlos Williams. It has, to the best of our knowledge, remained unpublished.

