

“Something stranger yet”

Theatrical Distractions in Henry James and Gertrude Stein

The scene, that evening, at which . . . I did not assist, is one of the most ineffaceable in my tolerably rich experience of the theatre.

(Henry James, 1903)

I think my first play really was *Pinafore* in London but the theatre there was so huge that I do not remember at all seeing a stage I only remember that it felt like a theatre that is the theatre did. I doubt if I did see the stage.

(Gertrude Stein, 1934)

He said, Can you tell me, Miss Stein, what authority you have for so frequently using the split infinitive? Henry James, said Gertrude.

(Alice B. Toklas, 1963)¹

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein identifies Henry James “quite definitely as her forerunner,” James having been “the first person in literature to find the way to the literary method of the twentieth century” (78). Depending on what version of Henry James comes most readily to your mind, this claim of affiliation might or might not be startling. Perhaps the clearest link between the two writers is the impetus both offer for thinking about how a “literary method” might also be a visual one: James, with his perpetual recurrence to the vocabulary of “picture,” his legendary development of “point of view,” and the exquisite phenomenology of seeing he presents in works like *The Turn of the Screw*; Stein, whose historical and aesthetic involvement with cubism not only appears throughout, but very often serves as a heuristic for her formally radical writings.² It’s no surprise, then, that both James and Stein have also often been read for their texts’ relationship to theater – the *theatron* being, etymologically, a “place for viewing.” And indeed, like many others of their respective generations who were “in literature,” they devoted serious time to writing for and about the stage.

Beyond registering this fact, what might it mean to call them both “theatrical” writers? Especially in James’s case, it has meant various things: critics have presented highly diverse characteristics of his writing – from representational economy to affect to ethics – under the sign of theatricality. Meanwhile, Stein’s pioneering contributions to experimental theater continue to place her prominently within the genealogy of the contemporary stage. As Sarah Bay-Cheng puts it, “the history of experimental theater and drama in America is virtually inconceivable without her influence” (1–2; see 115–142); Stein’s influence on such seminal artists as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Elizabeth LeCompte (all of whom have staged her plays) is well known.³ At the same time, however, both writers have also been understood as *antitheatrical*: James, in light of his incessant complaints, in fiction and nonfiction, about the fate of the dramatic text in the coarse hands of theatrical production (a fate he famously bore in person at the disastrous premiere of his *Guy Domville*); Stein, because her invention of the “landscape play” allegedly arises from a similar, modernist distaste for inherent properties of the theater medium. In this account, Stein’s alliance with visual modernism does not feed into an alliance with theater but, on the contrary, crystallizes her orientation against it.⁴

In this chapter, I suggest that a rigorous conceptual distinction between drama and theater can help clarify the theatrical/antitheatrical problematic that arises in the critical discourse around each author. It’s no anachronistic imposition to speak of a theater “beyond drama” in James’s and Stein’s texts; rather, it’s what the texts themselves imply. By treating drama and theater as separate concepts, we can begin to see a theatricality in James that is directly in conflict with his own attachment to dramatic norms; in his later fiction, a theatrical desire to see drama foiled perpetually disrupts a supposedly dramatic narrative. In Stein, a quite different picture emerges: her theater is not the ongoing downfall of drama but is, rather, what emerges when drama is simply set aside (one is tempted to say, ignored). Critical accounts of Stein’s theater as antitheatrical have as their premise a fundamentally *dramatic* understanding of theater as defined by “spatial and temporal continuity” (Puchner, *Stage* 110). But I’ll argue that the idea of theater that Stein elaborates, both in her 1935 lecture “Plays” and in her plays themselves, already exceeds such a framework.

Much closer to both Stein’s and James’s sense of theater is the theatricality theorized by poststructuralist scholar Samuel Weber in his 2004 *Theatricality as Medium*. Weber’s analysis rarely engages with concrete

instances of theatrical performance, and at times his notion of theatricality “as medium” – as in-betweenness, separation, and the disruption of self-identity – becomes so powerfully conceptual that its relationship to theatrical experience slips from view. While neither James nor Stein appears in Weber’s analysis, I find that their writing lends a more concretely theatrical determination to his theory, and I will refer to him repeatedly throughout the following pages. In fact, Weber’s relative lack of interest in the prevailing norms of existing theater, even while he explores its mediality, gives his approach an especially Steinian accent: while James’s theatricality finds itself in direct conflict with the dramatic standard of his day, Stein’s tends to bypass that standard entirely. Certainly, and indeed unlike James, Stein wrote plays that fly in the face of dominant theater norms; but her own writing encourages us to read these plays, not as a gesture of opposition to drama (much less to theater), but as arising out of alternative experiential possibilities that theater itself harbors.

In both authors, then, what has sometimes been seen as a rejection of theater is in fact an enthusiastic and canny appreciation of the theater medium, an embrace of theater’s possibilities beyond the dramatic. In making this distinction, I don’t mean to misrepresent the dialectical nature of antitheatricalism, particularly as theorized by Martin Puchner: his readings in *Stage Fright* trace the ways in which antitheatrical, diegeticizing impulses have *generated* crucial new forms of theater, including Stein’s plays.⁵ Since this book also theorizes a theater that takes issue with its own “happening,” it might seem odd that I don’t ally myself more fully with this critical tradition. My resistance to doing so comes from my belief that theater always bears the potential for such contestation – and that the awareness of this potential lies at the heart of the texts I read. Theater’s present-tense occurrence may come under attack, as in James; it may undergo a radical dispersion, as in Stein; or it may sustain a dialectical negation, as in Beckett. But for all these writers, the “anti-” lies *within* the scope of theatricality itself, and determines theater’s profound appeal. Theorizations of “antitheatrical theater,” by contrast, must at some point conceive of the theatrical as a more or less stable positive quantity, upon which negativity (or, say, modernism) supervenes as if from without. If one has defined theatricality in this way, one can quite properly show that a range of experimental texts repudiate it; but I find that such a conception of theatricality is false both to my own experience of theater and, more importantly, to the sense of theater that emerges in the texts examined here. To put it another way: the sense of distress that overtakes

some of these writers when they go to the theater does not mean that they'd rather stay home.⁶

In Chapter 1, I began to describe an aesthetic wherein theater would actively undermine the actuality of its own performance, reflexively attacking the shared here-and-now. Such theater produces distance, discrepancy, and discontinuity, qualities that, as I'll argue, determine the theatricality of writing for James and Stein. But if this is true, then Stein's theatricality in particular may need to be "rescued," not only from readings of her texts as antitheatrical, but also from readings that assert her pro-theatricality through a simple identification of theater with concreteness and total presence. Such readings identify an uncomplicated theatrical presence with Stein's well-known poetics of "entity" (orientation toward the thing-in-itself) and of the "continuous present." Thus, for example, in her stunningly comprehensive study of Stein's 77 plays and their performance legacies, Betsy Alayne Ryan writes:

The theatre's *concreteness*, its relational movement within the limitations of the performance, and its *purely present existence* could not help but strengthen her concepts of entity and time . . . she could *incarnate* them for the theatre in a way that literature never would. What better way of 'giving what I was realizing at any and every moment of them and of me until I was empty of them' – and of having it *directly and immediately perceived* by an audience as it occurred – than to do it through the theatre? What better way to insist upon the entity of a work than to isolate it from the world in a finite space and *present its solid reality* to an audience? (37, my emphases)

Compelling as Ryan's work is, her conception of what theater offered Stein threatens to miss, or misconstrue, the most radical qualities of Stein's playwriting. I'd suggest that neither the "Plays" lecture nor the landscape plays themselves espouse theater as "solid reality" or as purely immediate, concrete presence.⁷ Rather, as we'll see, Stein activates the spatial dimensions of theater to divide the concrete present from itself. Perhaps surprisingly, James can help us identify this maneuver, since the spatial logic that links his theatricality to Stein's is even more clearly opposed to any "solid reality" that could be "directly and immediately perceived." As the first two epigraphs to this chapter suggest, then, I will be offering a reading of James and Stein that emphasizes the extent to which each writer's sense of theater depends upon what is not "solidly" present: a sense of the stage as a place that, so to speak, keeps itself *apart*.

This is precisely how Samuel Weber theorizes theatricality. Framing theatricality as the operation of “*parting with*” (17–22, 158), Weber writes:

Place as separable is the stage. However defined its borders may be, they must still remain in contact with what they exclude and yet presuppose. Such contact may be temporarily forgotten, excluded from consciousness, but its effects do not disappear. Separation, in short, does not dissolve the relation to the other or to the outside, nor does it reduce the other to a goal or purpose that would complete a story and make it intelligible. Rather, separation communicates with that from which it distances itself . . . (294)

Both James and Stein explore the intuition that theater functions as the separation and interrelation of place(s) and time(s), fracturing the dramatic present. For James as for Stein, theater rends the here-and-now into irreducibly distant *parts*.

Throughout what follows, I hope to show how this theatricality aligns James’s writing with Stein’s most striking literary innovations – perhaps to a greater extent than Stein herself allowed. Indeed, readings that present Stein’s work in terms of either cubism or twentieth-century technology, as Stein herself frequently did, tend to imply that a figure like James, culminating master of “nineteenth-century” literature, could have had only a transitional (“proto-modernist”) relationship to her modernist achievements. If Stein’s work is “Cubism,” then James’s is still “Realism” (Caramello 164). If Stein’s work manifests twentieth-century physics, responding to a “universe where multidimensionality, not directionality, seemed the defining characteristic” (Ryan 10), we might well assume that James, too old to catch on to this *zeitgeist*, must have been outpaced by its literary manifestation. Glossing Stein’s account of airplane travel in “Picasso,” Ryan writes: “Driving in a car within the landscape on a road naturally resulted in a vision of progress or development – travel through time – where points of the journey are perceived in order, according to the movement of the car. The airplane, on the other hand, freed the traveller to order the journey as he wished while hovering over the whole landscape . . . an experience of time had become an experience of space” (9). And yet the dispersion of progressive time through a differential space is likewise, as I’ll suggest, a major project of James’s late fiction. With Stein, we can picture this kind of project forming from an airplane window; but James helps us imagine it forming, just as urgently, from a rather uncomfortable seat at the theater.

I Henry James

The intensity of Henry James's relationship to theater is not only a biographical fact; it has also become a critical commonplace. A theatrical vocabulary dominates his essays and his fiction, where narrators and characters alike seem to process almost every experience in terms borrowed from the stage. But this register has been marshaled for widely diverse interpretive purposes; throughout literary studies, the elucidation of Jamesian theatricality has referred to everything from a "rigid economy" of representation to a perceptual politics of "surveillance," from a moral concern with promiscuity to an investigation of group psychology to an erotics of display.⁸ I want to trace a rather different sense of theater that I find emerging in James's later fiction. On the one hand, this theater not only exceeds but challenges "dramatic" storytelling tendencies, and on the other, its qualities are not reducible to perceptual experiences of "seeing" or "showing." As such, James's texts begin to delineate a negative theatrics that will go on developing in the work of subsequent writers who engage the stage.

David Kurnick hints at James's movement beyond drama when he argues that *The Awkward Age* "strains against the novel toward a kind of performance, [while] it also resists the actually existing theater," a "naturalist drama" which in James's day was rapidly "adopting a notion of psychological truth in turn borrowed from realistic fiction" ("Horrible" III). The alterity of the "kind of performance" toward which James's late fiction strives is what I want to elucidate here. I will also be making the related claim that theatricality in James belongs to what is not straightforwardly seen or shown, an approach suggested by John Carlos Rowe's argument that "there is no perception, no impression in the ocular or present sense possible in James's epistemology" (202).⁹ Through close readings of passages from "The Beast in the Jungle" and *The Ambassadors*, and drawing upon the critical work of Leo Bersani and other theorists, I consider how James's refusal of the present – which is also the refusal to present – drives his discourse into deeply strange configurations. Narratologists' accounts of reading as a process of "linear detailing through time" (Chatman 107) will help establish the challenge James faced in importing his disintegrative sense of theatricality into a page-bound medium. This challenge was functionally analogous to the dramatic norm that confronted him in theater, but it was in his prose fiction that James attacked it most decisively. For James, theater's multidimensionality tends to explode the sense of ongoing immediacy that characterizes both drama

and reading; at the same time, it undermines the planar integrity of the image, as we'll see in the second section below. In turn, writing becomes theatrical by simulating the disruptive multiplicity of a deeply distracting space.

The Beast in the Sentence: Writing Theatrical Space

Born a century before Robert Wilson, Henry James might seem an unlikely candidate for “postdramatic” status. But James’s own approach to temporality would seem to smile on critical anachronism: *having been going to have been* postdramatic is exactly the kind of description his writing invites us to apply. The following sentence, from the fourth chapter of James’s 1903 tale “The Beast in the Jungle,” exemplifies such tortuous syntax beautifully: “It deepened the strangeness to see her, as such a figure in such a picture, talk of ‘horrors,’ but she was to do, in a few minutes, something stranger yet – though even of this he was to take the full measure but afterward – and the note of it was already in the air” (523). These typically Jamesian acrobatics have a specific temporal function: what begins as the conveyance of a temporally immanent response – “it deepened the strangeness to see her” – soon abandons that immanence, splitting one moment into three. The “scene” is not allowed to unfold in anything like a continuous sequence; instead, the present becomes the site of a doubly proleptic distraction, a graph-like surface on which multiple times are rendered.

Of course, a narrator’s reference to what’s going to happen, the dear-reader-if-she-only-knew technique, may just be a device for creating suspense – a ploy typical of literature’s “hermeneutic code” (Barthes, *S/Z* 61–63). But such usage normally affirms that one moment will lead to the next, making us relish the vector that points inexorably toward a payoff at the end of the read. In James’s sentence, by contrast, we get a promise of a promise of a retrospection: to move forward will not be to arrive at a climactic present but to continually negotiate a paradoxically simultaneous future and past. In fact, as the last few words of the sentence suggest, there is no such thing as a discrete moment: the space of the scene, its very “air,” is “already” inhabited by a time that exceeds it. This is what Leo Bersani describes as the “Jamesian tendency to extract all events, as well as all perspectives on them, from any specified time, and to transfer them to a before or after in which they are de-realized in the form of anticipations or retrospections” (Bersani and Phillips 23). As Bersani also observes, “The Beast in the Jungle” is remarkable in that it not only exhibits

but “thematizes” this default of event (*ibid.*). John Marcher is, James tells us, “*the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened” (“Beast” 540).

Still, why characterize James’s attack on the present as theatrical? After all, theater – and performance as such – is often described as the medium *of* the present, the form whose only time is now. While many theorists have sought to deconstruct the notion that theater offers full presence or immediacy, the very insistence of this “debate” shows how forcefully theater’s actuality continues to summon our attention. As we saw in Chapter 1, Szondi and Brecht suggest that dramatic theater directly affirms this actuality, asserting the here-and-now of performance and excluding the prospect of any alternative site. For Adorno, performance’s heightened actuality becomes a problem in that performance, constantly emerging into the real, fails to achieve the artwork’s constitutive “foreignness to the world.” And yet Adorno’s objection to the presence of performance is an objection that theater itself is also uniquely posed to make. Precisely because theater demands simultaneous, spatially adjacent appreciation, it can become a site for the contestation of the present. We’ll see in the following chapter that Beckett’s early theater seizes on drama’s “absolute present,” exacerbating it to the point of dialectical reversal. For James and Stein, however, theater’s power and pleasure arise from properties that *always* threaten to undermine presence. In James’s theater, what we will (borrowing from Bersani) call the medium’s “other parts” keep rising up against the centralizing force of the dramatic present. Accordingly, to read James is to see how theater might appeal to a sensibility critical of the present as such.

From such a perspective we can acknowledge that drama’s affirmation of actuality exploits a fundamental aspect of performance, while also seeing that dramatic logic works *in reaction against* other elements of the theater medium. This chapter’s first epigraph is drawn from a 1903 work in which James remembers being excluded from a family trip to the theater when he was little: the play “at which . . . I did not assist,” he writes, became an “ineffaceable” theater experience (*William* 259, qtd. in Caramello 84–85) – not in spite of but *through* having missed the show. The passage exemplifies the Jamesian approach to experience that Kevin Ohi has described as a queer “erotics of belatedness,” in which “the regret for the life one missed *is*, paradoxically, the life one missed” (150, 156). But it also ties that erotics specifically to theater experience, as constituted in this primal “scene” of James’s relationship to the stage: theater’s *happening* becomes seductive precisely by being something we can miss.¹⁰ Attending the theater doesn’t

dispel this promise, either: on the contrary, every show confronts us with the looming possibility that a performance will offer too much for us to synthesize “now.” James describes this sensory surfeit in *The Ambassadors*, when the protagonist Strether attends a play at a London theater:

He felt as if the play itself penetrated him with the naked elbow of his neighbor, a great stripped handsome red-haired lady who conversed with a gentleman on her other side in stray dissyllables which had for his ear, in the oddest way in the world, so much sound that he wondered they hadn't more sense . . . He had distracted drops in which he couldn't have said if it were actors or auditors who were most true, and the upshot of which, each time, was the consciousness of new contacts. (92)

At once unsettling and thrilling, theater is a field where “new contacts” loom on every side, where “distracted drops” ongoingly divide our attention. Amidst all these solicitations, there is little chance of our focusing on the plot.

In an attempt to prevail against this field of distractions, drama pursues an ideal of maximal *clarity*. This ideal still organizes contemporary dramaturgy to a remarkable extent;¹¹ in James's day, it was even more pervasive. H. G. Wells could write, in his review of James's play *Guy Domville*, that “[a] play written for the stage may very well be compared to a pen-and-ink drawing that is to undergo reproduction by some cheap photographic process. Delicate turns, soft shades, refinements of grey *must* be avoided; bold strokes, black and firm – that is all that is possible” (qtd. in Edel 212–213). In reading James's play, though, one is struck by its relative shortage of “delicate turns” – verbal or psychological – compared with his fiction. It is difficult to imagine words like the following in the novels or stories James would write after his “dramatic years”:

MRS. PEVEREL. You speak for him as if – (*Breaking down with excess of feeling. Re-enter FRANK HUMBER and LORD DEVENISH.*)

GUY. As if I didn't love you to passion – heaven hear me! And as if – heaven hear me! – I hadn't come down here to *tell* you so! (Edel 199)

James himself tended to account for such straightforwardness as a concession to the theater audience's mental limitations. “In that art,” he bitterly writes his publisher in 1894, “one must specify one's subject as unmistakably as one orders one's dinner – I mean leave the audience no trouble to disengage or disentangle it. Forget not that you write for the stupid – that is, that your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience, in other words, of the biggest

ass it may conceivably contain” (qtd. in Margolis 85). This is the classically “antitheatrical” James, raging against “that art” with a mixture of throbbing resentment and wry self-incrimination. Evidently, he hoped to write well even under these daunting conditions; as Anne T. Margolis observes, he was “quite capable of regarding these conditions as a challenge rather than as a barrier” (72). Margolis offers a convincing portrait of James as a writer deeply worried about his audience, even “obsessed with his dream of . . . winning the approval of the multitudes” during his playwriting years (84) – a dream for which he would willingly “sacrifice[e] every note of subtlety” in his work (56). Certainly, James’s solicitude for “the biggest ass” in the theater can account for the “bold strokes” of his plays; but his hyperbolic efforts to make things clear also bespeak his *own* sense of how persistently theater mediates against clarity.

The directness (by James standards) with which his stage characters express themselves suggests his awareness of performance as threatening a phenomenal overload. Like Wells, James was attuned to the ways in which theater’s “turns” could undermine drama’s “bold strokes.” The “incorruptibility of line” that the protagonist of another James tale ascribes enthusiastically to “the dramatic form” (“Nona” 5) is drama’s defensive response to a theatrical potential for distraction: the danger that a viewer or performer will lose the thread of her own experience. Ideally, each instant of the drama would offer itself to immediate comprehension and thus ease us along to the next, producing the “pure actuality” (Szondi 38) that sustains the continuity of the dramatic timeline.

When we recall the baffling contortions of our sentence from “The Beast in the Jungle,” James’s writing looks like a terrifically unpromising candidate for any such communicative immediacy. And yet the lines from *Guy Domville* suggest that when it came time to contribute to the theater of his day, James tried to abide by dramatic standards. Indeed, he often expressed frustration with the ways actual theater confounded dramatic law.¹² When characters in his story “Nona Vincent” describe the transition from page to stage as “a sudden descent” into “vulgarity” (6), they may well be speaking James’s own conviction. But James’s keen *frustration* with the ways theatrical production departs from the “pure art” (“Nona” 6) of drama is only the obverse of his equally keen awareness of theater *as* precisely this departure, or difference. I do not believe we can make sense of his continued return to the theater without supposing that he got a tremendous charge from the “distracted drops” of theater’s continual, constitutive “descent.” This theatrical charge is the thrill of taking pleasure

in perversion. “I want to intensely,” says the playwright when asked if he wants “to be acted,” “but I’m sorry I want to” (ibid.).

Ultimately, as Kurnick suggests, the dramatic conventions of James’s day – conventions he himself tried to abide by – prevented him from realizing his own polymorphous theatricality in works for the stage. Those conventions were (and are) geared toward repressing precisely the experience that James knew so well: the expansive, disintegrative moment of *falling apart*, the rending of the dramatic moment from itself. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century British theater would not willingly house such an art of disintegration; James therefore transplanted his sense of theater to the field of prose fiction.

But what does it mean to make theater on the pages of a story or novel? For James, this becomes a question about *reading* versus *attending*: what would prose fiction have to do to fabricate a theatrical experience for its reader? What basic differences between these activities would such a hybridizing project need to surmount? We have already encountered one answer in Brecht’s converse idea of “literarization.” For Brecht, reading’s appeal resides in the way the page lies open to investigation, *meeting* my gaze; theater, by contrast, threatens at once to compel and to dodge my attention.¹³ This account of reading finds corroboration in the work of narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman. According to Chatman, written narrative describes by way of a “linear detailing through time” (107): it presents its objects by doling out their information in a sequence of units, producing them in a forward temporal movement that corresponds to the progress of our eyes over successive characters on the page. We get our information as we go; the written text “has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading” (Genette 34). Funneling all information through the channel of my uptake, the text has no room for an *other* time. The now of my reading is all there is, temporally, to this activity. Anything more can only come in its turn; that is, when I turn to it.

Of course, the notion that I could ever be fully coincident with what I read, that a piece of language could really be delivering its whole meaning to me at any moment, has long been recognized as theoretically untenable. As we will see, Stein in particular complicates the understanding of written narrative as a continuous stream of immediate communication, through her explicit insistence that most texts harbor “two times” as well as through her writing itself. Nevertheless, I think the narratologists’ account does speak to a normative experience, or expectation, of reading: a page of text will tend to *present itself* as a direct stream of information, where the reader

can regulate the stream's flow in order to access each moment's content. She accesses the text in her own time; there is nothing given there that she can't, in principle, receive.

In theater, by contrast, there is always a potential for overload. Events occur with or without our uptake, distributed across a differential space of "naked elbows," "stray dissyllables," and other things, bodies, and places that can compete for our attention. James's writing boils with the specific awareness that even the most unassuming drawing-room scenery threatens to rear up, in its recesses and furnishings, and distract us from whatever is going on at center stage. Theater's constitutive simultaneity, the fact that its "here" can always be divided into "there, there, and there," means that in any given moment there is always, phenomenally, more than what we attend to in that moment; this excess is part of the medium itself. Here, any stream of consciousness flows over rough terrain, which always threatens to interrupt and divert it: "linear detailing" cannot describe the course. Instead, the spatial dimensions of the medium house a time other than mine. If drama aims to reduce this plurality to a single, emphatic *now*, it does so in the face of an ongoing danger: I might fall out of step with that present, something else in the room might suddenly call me away.

A novelist with a longing for theater, then, might seek strategies for undoing the effect of immediacy that reading seems to offer. And if she had to remain within the parameters of the textual medium, she might try to simulate theatrical interference *on the level of narrative*. A writer with an inveterate desire for theater, that is, might look for ways to set forks in the stream of her story, to pull open a disruptive additional dimension, to achieve a pseudospatiality in writing. Such a "theatricalization of literature" would in one sense constitute a kind of anticipatory countermove to Brecht's "literarization of theater": a repudiation of epic clarity and control, a subjection to the rhythms of a realm not cognitively my own. It might seem that James's Strether, in his throes of elated frustration, could not be farther from Brecht's ideal of the "literarized" theatergoer: relaxed, self-possessed, "watching-while-smoking" (72). And yet as we saw in Chapter 1, Brecht's "literarization" also fundamentally works to diversify spectatorial attention, pulling us away from the "single track" of drama (*ibid.*). In *this* sense, Jamesian theatricality is already highly "literarized"; Brecht and James converge in seeking analogies between the two media's possibilities for disrupting dramatic focalization.¹⁴

Throughout James's later work, this project amounts to what I have called his attack on the present – exactly what we see in our passage from "The Beast in the Jungle," which I will quote again here: "she *was to do*, in

a few minutes, something stranger *yet* – though even of *this* he was to take the full measure *but afterward* – and the note of *it was already* in the air” (523, my emphases). Tenses and disparate temporal markers proliferate: “was to do,” “but afterward,” and “already” pull the intensifier “yet” toward its temporal meaning. Pronouns accumulate, their referents perpetually deferred: “something,” “this,” “it.” The elaborate refusal to give us any temporally intact moment or simply *show us anything now* stretches our attention toward multiple points at once, so the *time* of the narrative takes on a back-and-forth movement that simulates the distracting multidimensionality of theatrical *space*. James scatters the “now” of reading into a field of other moments, inaccessible alterities.

Bersani might well be thinking of passages like this when he observes, in “The Jamesian Lie,” that “James’s habit of giving us the consequences and the implications of a thought or a fact before giving us the thought or the fact itself shifts the organizing principle of the text from the temporal logic of a character engaged in the story’s movement to the spatial perspective of a narrator who ignores his character’s time for the sake of his own designs” (*Future* 143). We could take this remark as an invitation to see James simply privileging space over time, but I don’t believe this is the most productive reading of either James or Bersani. After all, as the next section of this chapter will emphasize, movement along the temporal axis plays a key role in James’s disruptive theatrics. In this passage from “The Beast,” what we witness is less a subordination than a reorganization of time, such that temporality itself takes on the discontinuous multiplicity of theater space. Narrative sequence is thus driven, as it were, to distraction: not one thing after another, but each thing always behind, before, beneath, beyond something else – “something stranger yet.”

Bersani does not discuss James’s work in terms of theater, but his writing on performance offers terms for understanding the way Jamesian narrative explodes any unified or “immediate” present. In another essay published in the same book with “The Jamesian Lie,” Bersani discusses contemporary experimental theater, exemplified for him by the work of Robert Wilson. Such work, he writes, is “engaged in decentralizing the audience’s attention” (*Future* 284). Whereas “[n]umerous aspects of traditional theater work to centralize our attention” and “the movement toward climaxes or *dénouements* could be thought of as a way of closing in, during the time of the drama, on its central significance,” the phenomenal multiplicity of Wilson’s productions works the opposite way (*ibid.*). “The action [*is*] always somewhere else,” Bersani writes, noting: “If we look intently at

one part of a Wilson tableau, our attention is peripherally solicited by *other parts* of the tableau” (284–285, my emphasis). Interestingly, James makes a similar point, though with a different slant, in his glowing 1891 review of *Hedda Gabler*: “such a production asks the average moral man to see too many things at once” (*Scenic* 252–253). Through the heightened experience of what Bersani calls “other parts” – what James calls “too many things at once” or, in *The Ambassadors*, “the consciousness of new contacts” – theater resists the dramatic ideal of continuous presentation. James’s prose becomes theatrical in fabricating the same resistance.

It may therefore be time to revisit an old *topos* of James criticism, sprung from James’s own accounts of his work: the famous “scenic method.” This term refers to various ways in which, as is commonly held, James’s fiction models itself upon theatrical presentation. Leon Edel’s classic account of James’s vexed relationship to theater, for example, suggests that fiction is scenic wherever conversations “unfold without the intervention of the narrator” (115). Seeking a more rigorous definition, Joseph Wiesenfarth explicates the theatrical provenance of James’s fiction in terms of “intensity,” “economy,” and “objectivity” (3). Such readings once again construct theater, and by extension James’s “scenic” writing, in terms of a heightened immediacy – an association that should by now appear thoroughly problematic. On the contrary, James works from a feel for theater, and hence for scene, that emphasizes theater’s potential *interference with* immediacy, the heterogeneity and distraction that can counteract the temporal unity of spectatorial attention and narrative “stream.”

James himself discusses his work’s “scenic consistency” in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, a novel I will return to in the following section of this chapter. James designates one particular passage of *The Ambassadors* as “an excellent *standard scene*” (47–48); before coming back to “The Beast in the Jungle,” therefore, it seems worthwhile to inquire how this apparently exemplary Jamesian scene plays out. In fact, it is the same episode that includes the passage about theater I quoted earlier. In this scene, the American protagonist Lewis Lambert Strether goes to a play in London with his new friend Maria Gostrey; between the acts, he explains to her how and why he has become the “ambassador” for a wealthy New England family, on his way to Paris with orders to bring home their wayward son, Chad Newsome. This definitively “scenic” scene does begin with several lines of dialogue between Strether and Gostrey; but if we expect this shining specimen to be devoid of narrative “intervention,” we are mistaken. About halfway through the scene, Strether and Gostrey are discussing the identity of “the article produced” at Woollett,

Massachusetts, the source of the Newsomes' (and potentially Strether's) fortune. She tries to guess; "he persuaded her to patience. But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the sequel never *was* to tell her. He actually never did so . . . She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnameable – she could make their abstention enormously definite. There might indeed have been for Strether a portent of this in what she next said" (97–98). Even in its most "standard" edition, then, the Jamesian scene refuses to let the time of the story unfold with the continuity proper to drama. Instead, it labors to create the sense of a theatrical "more": a content in excess of the present action. James proleptically adapts the "always somewhere else" of theater for written prose, by creating a narrative that is always *somewhen* else.¹⁵

If we are quick to identify theater with the immediate here-and-now that defines drama's ideal, we won't be able to grasp the way such maneuvers in themselves constitute a "scenic" poetics. A reading attuned to theatrical possibilities beyond drama, however, can recognize theater in the way these scenes *deny* the possibility of a self-contained moment. James's own characterization of the ideal scene enacts this very denial: "copious, comprehensive, and accordingly never short, but with its office as definite as that of the hammer on the gong of the clock, the office of expressing *all that is in the hour*" (*Ambassadors* 48). Itself a spatialized image of time, the simile divides our attention; the sentence's syntax encourages us to accept the clock's office *as* the scene's – which might bring us close to a traditional understanding of scenic temporality – but the emphasis at the end suggests that clock and scene really have opposite functions: where one expresses the hour, the other expresses *all that is in* it. The scene, that is, turns the hour inside-out, subjecting temporal flow to the distractions of heterogeneous copia. As the passage from *The Ambassadors* shows, what is "in" the hour for James includes what is, by the standards of the clock, definitely outside it.

In the midst of all this material, what dissolves is the dramatic event itself: the striking of the hammer, which would register temporal progress, never even *happens* in James's parable; instead, the hammer hangs suspended in the strange phrase of its "office on" the gong.¹⁶ These scenes hardly lack content, but the very abundance of their content makes them resistant to actualization, stretching them insistently beyond the "now." In forsaking drama's presentism, they also fight against the flow of readerly consciousness, simulating the distractions of theatrical space.

If we return to "The Beast in the Jungle," we can identify the moment that would, in a truly "dramatic" writer, be the story's climax; instead, it becomes the climax of a decidedly different, Jamesian theatricality. Recall

that our original passage referred to “something stranger yet” that May Bartram “was to do”; I want to turn now to James’s account of this strange action. We have also been told that John Marcher “was to take the full measure [of it] but afterward”; as this foreshadowing suggests, Marcher’s retrospective rearticulation of this scene will constitute the story’s final crisis. The passage in question, which begins when the dying May tells Marcher “it’s never too late” (526) but ends by her affirming that “what *was* to happen has happened (527), is exactly a compositional space kept open for subsequent interpretive recrossings: May’s, Marcher’s, and our own. It is *not* the narrative transmission of anything we (or Marcher) can immediately recognize, in the “now” of our reading (of his beholding), as an event. In marking out this empty space, proleptically and analeptically determined as the story’s center, James deploys his typical anti-event moves: “She *had*, with her gliding step, diminished the distance between them, and she stood nearer to him, close to him, a minute, *as if* still charged with the unspoken. Her movement *might have been* for some finer emphasis of what she was *at once hesitating and deciding* to say” (526, my emphases). Here though – as with the plot of “The Beast” as a whole – James also provides a concrete *image* of not-happening, in the eerie “minute” of May’s stasis, which outlasts and frustrates Marcher’s retrieval of any “movement” that “had” preceded it.

May now usurps the function of the Beast and of Jamesian narrative: “She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited” (ibid.). This sentence repeats in miniature the entire thrust of the story: a default of event, at first presented as the fault of the hero’s virtual antagonist, is then interpretively relocated (“that is”) as a fault of his own. Marcher spends most of his life under the impression that he is being “kept waiting” by another – fate, the Beast – only to revise this formulation at the end: the problem all along has been that “*he* only waited,” the leap having really been his to take.¹⁷ But in thus encapsulating the story, this self-revising sentence also helps to produce a theatrical dispersion of time: the “minute” of Marcher’s waiting is rendered multiple, not only by the fact that we get two different accounts of it (one where May only keeps Marcher waiting, one where Marcher only waits) but also by the fact that this “minute” will turn out upon rereading to have contained “*all that is in*” the story. This specifically Jamesian “scenic consistency,” however, is not simply a matter of moments pregnant with meaning. Rather James constructs, for the reader as for Marcher, the experience of an utter *refusal* of meaning in any dramatic sense – the scene’s absolute refusal to signify within the here-and-now in which it (only barely) occurs. “[W]hat he saw in her face was

the truth,” we read (*ibid.*): but in the Jamesian *theatron*, “the truth” can be “seen” without thereby becoming accessible, without granting us anything now. Staging this refusal, James offers a breathtaking preview of Weber’s “theatricality as medium”: “Since no narrative sequence succeeds in framing or enclosing the places it traverses,” Weber writes, “it winds up being traversed by them, being opened, every time it tries to conclude, toward other scenes, which remain inconclusive” (22). For James, too, the theatrical “distance between them” – between Marcher and May, audience and performer – turns out to be an intervening, mediating space through which seeing the truth is exactly not getting it.

The vehemence with which space intervenes, not only between characters but between reading and “getting” more generally, manifests itself here in the odd eruption of yet another typical Jamesian peculiarity: what Ezra Pound called James’s “dam’d fuss about furniture” (“Henry” 308).¹⁸ There is no end of moments, throughout James’s work, when the material trappings of a room rise to such prominence in narrative consciousness that they seem to menace the story’s continuity. One of the most startling occurs in the middle of the passage we’ve been discussing:

Her movement might have been for some finer emphasis of what she was at once hesitating and deciding to say. He had been standing by the chimney-piece, fireless and sparsely adorned, *a small, perfect old French clock and two morsels of rosy Dresden constituting all its furniture*; and her hand grasped the shelf while she kept him waiting, grasped it a little as for support and encouragement. She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited. (526, my emphasis)

By the standards of dramatic storytelling, the excursus on tchotchkes is simply bizarre. It is only James’s brazen commitment to another theatricality that lets “*all that is in the hour*” rise up at this moment; that lets the multiplicity of space assert itself, in a veritable aggression of *mise-en-scène*, as a violent distraction from the drama of May’s love and John’s greed. The clock, with its outrageously nested adjectives, seems to flaunt an ability to suspend the present occurrence, stopping the narrative in its tracks and insisting that *something else* must be acknowledged. James’s passage illustrates this theatrical capacity of objects: they assert themselves at the most outrageous possible moment, in blithe defiance of our desire to follow the plot. They are like the dark doubles of the Chekhovian rifle, with its promise of dramatic significance. Unlike that emphatically meaningful weapon, Jamesian things mark a theatrical excess of differential space, the irruptive disabling of synthesizing comprehension.

“something . . . had been wanted in the picture”: *Disrupted Image in
The Ambassadors*

When things also go awry for Lewis Lambert Strether in Book XI of *The Ambassadors*, the explicit theatricality of this incident brings us to a different, but related, mode of Jamesian theater. In “The Beast in the Jungle,” theater operates as a mode that pulls apart its own present. Simulating the multiplicity of theater space, James’s narrative undermines the “now” of reading – and the fluid progression that drama tries its best to impose. In the scene I want to look at next, however, the “stream” of temporal flow is not the target but the agent of theatrical disruption. In what we might call the *disrupted image*, a differential element of motion comes to disturb an essentially static “picture,” mobilizing the difference of change over time against the relative stability of a pictorial surface. In either mode, theater emerges as the disruptive opening of an additional dimension; we might say that while devices like prolepsis and hypothesis let James theatricalize narrative *time*, the disrupted image lets him theatricalize presentational *space*. Moreover, the fact that the former mode always remains in play means that “action” in the latter still fails to centralize, or focus, the scene. Instead, space and time rend dramatic unity along both axes.

In the scene at hand, Strether has embarked on a day in the countryside, in search of “that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame” (452). The “picture” seems at first to be a metaphor for Strether’s naïve romanticization of the land, but James soon grounds it in a surprising (one might even feel, excessive) literality: Strether’s desire for this landscape turns out to be bound up with his onetime desire for an actual picture. “[H]e could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer’s and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten . . . The little Lambinet abode with him as the picture he *would* have bought” (ibid.). The identification of the painting as “the picture he *would* have bought” already invests it with a kind of multiplicity, splitting it between the actual nonevent (of purchase) and the hypothetical act. At the same time, though, the apparently perfect coincidence of the countryside with Strether’s desire suggests – in a Jamesian context – that the picture may be a repressively limiting conceit. “The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars, and willows, the reeds and river . . . fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them”: the landscape

becomes the picture only as the effect of the “enclosing” frame, whose odd grammatical position as the subject of the first clause underscores the sense of this synthesis as forced. We are also invited to notice that the pictorial metaphor itself depends on the additional dimension the metaphor promises to exclude. Thus Strether can find himself “freely walking about” in the painting only insofar as the painting is *more than* its pictorial surface: by “boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall” (ibid.).¹⁹ This playful suggestion contains the serious reminder that the picture can be violated, precisely because it has – as no ideal plane does – an *other side*. Only apparently manifest as surface, the image holds its own alterity in reserve. In quartering Strether for the day, the French countryside hints at its own hindquarters – its “other parts.”

We might think, here, of John Marcher’s final posture in “The Beast in the Jungle”: “he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb” (541).²⁰ In this position, he at once exposes himself to the Beast he hallucinates and, by refusing to “meet” his fate, extends the tale’s postdramatic refusal of immediacy to its very last sentence. This theatrical obtrusion of “other parts,” in both passages, might further remind us of Antonin Artaud’s desire to activate theater space “*in its undersides (dans ses dessous)*” (*Theater* 124): to seize it in its dimensional difference, which traditional theater represses for the sake of “a culture without shadows” (12). And indeed, in Strether’s idyll, the jocular prospect of “boring” too deep heralds his eventual realization that the picture has not offered a sufficient analogy for his day after all: “this had been all day *at bottom* the spell of the picture – that it was essentially more than anything else *a scene and a stage*, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky” (458, my emphases).

What prompts this medial transformation is Strether’s dawning awareness that “though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in midstream of his drama” (457–458). That “drama” is young Chad Newsome’s affair with the married Madame de Vionnet, and the question of how this drama is, and isn’t, “his” (Strether’s) is the novel’s central problematic. But in the imaginative context of a static picture, the “drama,” and specifically the “stream” of its temporality, provides the dimensional disruption that makes the painting erupt into theater. As Rowe observes, “visual impressions” in James are “always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations” (194); Strether’s “hopes of finding nothing but surfaces” in the countryside are therefore destined to be dashed (197).²¹ The “sharp

fantastic crisis” (*Ambassadors* 462) that takes place when Chad and Madame de Vionnet show up, evidently in the country on an adulterous overnight trip, does not exactly destroy Strether’s Lambinet; rather, their disturbing presence now seems to have been the *telos* of the entire afternoon, “as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day” (461). And the foregoing revelation, that the picture “had been all day . . . a scene and a stage” *because* it could still be traversed by the “stream” of drama, prepares us to understand the “crisis” of the episode as theatrical. Theatricality bursts forth, that is, as the manifestation of what the pictorial surface in itself lacked – and as what Strether, unbeknownst to himself, must have “wanted.”²²

This sense of picture as both in want of (lacking) and wanting (inviting) the dimensional irruption of scene and stage corresponds to standard Jamesian poetics: “The picture is to set the stage in every needful way for the action of the scene” (Wiesenfarth 34). We should, by this point, have complicated our sense of the Jamesian scene as “action”; but by literalizing the “picture” of novelistic description, the *Ambassadors* episode enacts both the tension and the cooperation between static and (spatio)temporal media, where the picture’s “want” opens the space of performance, or “sets the stage” for the scene that will come to disturb its planar surface. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this dynamic appears in the role of the *river* in Strether’s countryside. Explicitly bound up with the pictoriality of the landscape, the river is twice marked as a site of ignorance. At first “the poplars and willows, the reeds and river – *a river of which he didn’t know, and didn’t want to know, the name* – fell into a composition” (453, my emphasis): Strether’s willful unknowing is set off in the discourse as if to produce the “want” it denies. Then later, shortly before his friends’ appearance, Strether arrives for dinner in “a village that affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in coppery green, and that had a river flowing *behind or before it – one couldn’t say which*” (457, my emphasis). The river marks precisely the depthlessness of the pictorial impression, which denies the difference between “before” and “behind”: denies the theatrical space of undersides and backsides, even as here, too, the discourse registers that denial as a lack. But this same river will emerge with a vengeance from the indifference of the pictorial: it is *by way of the river* that Chad and Madame de Vionnet invade Strether’s picture, rather violently literalizing and affirming Strether’s perception that he has been “in midstream of his drama” all along. The river has twice marked Strether’s pictorializing repression of alterity, his refusal to acknowledge either the differentiations of history (the river’s name) or the differential

resources of space (“behind or before”). As if in retribution, the river now comes to disrupt all pictorial self-evidence: it becomes the conduit of movement whereby the “others” we hadn’t seen turn out to make all the difference in the world. In the process, we come to understand Strether’s initial exclusion of such “others” as a symptom of “want” in both senses: a lack, but also, perversely, a desire.

Just as the strategies of Jamesian syntax diffract the linear stream of narrative events into a spatializing diachrony, the Jamesian disruption of picture mobilizes that stream against the immediacy of the planar image in a “crossing of time and space” (Rowe 216). Both of these operations, I contend, respond to a theatrical desire for a heterogeneous, differential medium. And the two operations collaborate: Strether experiences the scene that has exceeded his Lambinet most significantly, and typically, in retrospect, as the “belated vision” of a subsequent vigil: “He then knew more or less how he had been affected – he but half knew at the time” (465). Alone in his rooms, Strether revisits the day’s events; describing his ride back to Paris with the lovers, the discourse passes between pluperfect and narrative past, so that it becomes impossible to locate his realization firmly in either scene: “The eating and drinking, which had been a resource, had had the effect of having served its turn . . . and it was during their somewhat tedious progress to the station, . . . their silences in the dim compartment of the much-stopping train, that he prepared himself for reflexions to come” (466). Consciousness, here, is half anticipation and half retrospect; experience slides back and forth between these two moments, unable to take place in either one.

This temporal dispersion of the event of consciousness, moreover, is inseparable from *what* the consciousness is *of*: the fact that Madame de Vionnet’s disposition all evening “had been a performance” (ibid.). Here as so often in James, that is, a character’s behavior gets recognized *as theater*, and while this recognition seems somehow illuminating, its meaning proves resistant to any other formulation. “Performance” is by no means, for instance, just a synonym for “deception,” even though the substance of Madame’s performance is indeed the falsehood that she and Chad “had left Paris that morning, and with no design but of getting back within the day” (467). Strether’s response to this “lie” (466) is not only moral but also keenly appreciative, a response to her virtuosity: “From the point of view of presence of mind it had been very wonderful indeed, wonderful for readiness, for beautiful assurance, for the way her decision was taken on the spot, without time to confer with Chad, without time for anything” (ibid.). “A performance” is not merely a metaphor for what Madame has

done; she has literally engaged body, voice, and language in creating an aesthetic experience, as she constantly does throughout the novel (we already know that as a child she had “made a clean sweep . . . of every ‘part’, whether memorized or improvised, in the curtained costumed school repertory” [224]). Strether becomes this particular performance’s producer only in tortuous Jamesian retrospect, and he produces it as a performance of immediacy: that “*presence* of mind,” that punctual temporality of acting “on the spot . . . without time for anything.” But by making it the imaginative product of Strether’s “belated vision,” James shows us how this dramatic ideal of action as self-contained, undistributed unity arises out of – and, in spite of itself, remains within – a theatrical space of diffraction. The theater where Madame de Vionnet’s performance can be “seen” is precisely the differential space that arises when the moment of recognition is pulled apart, distributed between preparation (when Strether “but half knew”) and recollection (when he “knew more or less”).

Ultimately, too, Strether’s retrospective focus shifts from the performance itself, which disturbs him with “the quantity of make-believe involved,” to “the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (468). Like the “truth” John Marcher sees in May Bartram’s face, this “truth” never unfurls discursively; it maintains the maddening ineffability of an object whose dimensions – “deep, deep” – resist sublimation into dramatic logic. The theatricality of the Jamesian “show” is just this kind of depth, the evasive recess whereby narrative manages to withhold what it “reveals.” The afternoon-as-painting had promised total accessibility, with Strether “freely walking about in it” (453) in recuperation of the lost but, in principle, accessible Lambinet. Reconceived as theater, the same day gives out onto a depth that is irreducibly a distance, and Strether finds himself excluded from the very “show” he attends (or at which, we might say, he assists). But this distance is also the dimension of desire. The space between Strether’s lonely rooms and the colorful village – and the space between both of these and those other rooms, somewhere upstream, where Chad and Madame de Vionnet must have enacted their “intimacy” – describes the stage on which Strether can finally unleash his nocturnal fantasies. These now exhibit the riotous multiplicity of the experimental stage: “He recognized at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things” (468).

For James, theater carries us away; it works on us by pulling us apart. Marcher and Strether are both subjected to this theater, and neither will

succeed in “getting back, as he might put it, into his own presence” (“Beast” 536). And yet this gap determines the playing space of Jamesian erotics, where love itself is the individual’s subjection to anachrony, the dispersive force of a desire that knows no present. This ceaseless undoing constantly interferes with the drama of James’s writing; but it opens the page into a space of theatrical departure.

2 Gertrude Stein

Reflecting, as she so often did, on her own earlier work, Gertrude Stein observed that her sentences “had a balance which was the balance of a space completely not filled but created by something moving as moving is not as moving should be. As I said,” she continued, “Henry James in his later writing had a dim feeling that this was what he knew he should do” (*Writings* 132). This chapter began by observing that Stein identified James as “her forerunner” in *The Autobiography*; here, Stein conceives herself as developing a particular Jamesian tendency. We might note, however, that this recognition itself takes place by way of a temporal gymnastics that makes James’s own innovation proleptic: it’s not James who influences Stein, but as it were the other way around. Beyond reversing the logic of influence, Stein’s insistence that writerly space is “completely not filled” might make us think of the exactly opposite terms in which James had extolled drama: “the real [dramatist] gets down on his knees, disposes of his goods . . . and at last rises in triumph, having packed his coffer in the one way that is mathematically right. It closes perfectly; between one object and another you cannot insert the point of a penknife” (qtd. in Edel 39–40). In discerning a language that opens space rather than filling or “clos[ing]” it, Stein begins to identify the theatricality by which James exceeds his own dramatic ideal of communicative compaction – the pen/knife that disruptively pushes its way into every scene. And this identification proceeds by way of a literary historicity we can now recognize as itself a piece of Jamesian theatricality: Stein constitutes the event of James’s writing retroactively, as anticipation. James, in other words, becomes not a writer who was, but a writer who will have been going to be – i.e., to be Stein. “He came not to begin but to have begun,” she writes of him in *Four in America* (*Writings* 291).

If Stein positions her own writing here as the culmination and even, paradoxically, the origin of James’s, elsewhere she frames her work’s value in terms of its kinship with the visual art of her contemporaries, specifically cubism. As we can now observe, however, Jamesian theater seems to haunt

this affinity too. Stein identifies cubism's "triple foundation" as the "composition of which one corner was as important as another corner," the disappearance of "faith in what the eyes were seeing," and the pictures' new desire "to leave their frames" ("Picasso" 19); this is the same perspectival rebellion we have discovered in James's theatrics of undersides and back-sides. Nevertheless, Stein would most likely want to qualify the similarity; although she acknowledges James's importance, she is always careful to distinguish his achievement from her own. James, Stein writes in *Four in America*, "is a combination of the two ways of writing" (291), which are "the way when you write what you are writing" and "the way when you write what you are going to be writing or what some other one would have written if they had been writing" (282). The latter "way" certainly does describe the strategies of Jamesian scenography as we've analyzed it; by contrast, "the way when you write what you are writing" would seem to denote the ideal of a unified, self-contained present. And indeed, Stein proclaims her dedication to the present throughout her work. In "Portraits and Repetition," for example, she criticizes "intelligent people" because "although they talk as if they knew something [they] are really confusing, because they are so to speak keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking" (*Writings* 106). She describes her "portraits" as an attempt at "making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering" (107), and in "Plays" she insists that "The business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present" (65).

Given this poetics of the present, it is surprising that the piece in which she formalizes her binary of "the two ways of writing" should bear the name of, and keep returning to, a figure who she insists *combines* them. This fact alone suggests that Stein's present is inherently permeable. If it can exclude the "two times at once" of "remembering," it still maintains relations with the "going to" and "would have"; these can impose themselves productively upon the present in such a way as to yield, for instance, the general who Henry James "was or was not" (283). Just as Henry James, in the ways this chapter has been tracing, explodes the dramatic integrity of the narrative present, "Henry James" seems to undermine the poetic present as a time that must be fully or "completely" its own. This composition signals to Stein's reader that her "complete actual present" is more conceptually complex than we might assume. In what follows, I'll be examining the theatrical ramifications of that complexity.

Nevertheless, Stein does continually makes it clear that in her own most important writing, she has attempted to make the present her sole temporal site.²³ She frames her ability to recognize and achieve this goal – to activate “something moving as moving is” rather than “as moving should be” – as her advance beyond James, who keeps one foot stuck in the dispersive temporality of recollection, anticipation, and hypothetical that Stein will (have been going to) transcend. Her commitment to the present makes her cast James’s innovation “in his later writing” as an approach to presentness; she is no doubt responding to the outrageousness of his syntax, the incredibly elaborate and processual – because never finished – construction of sense, glaringly driven by imperatives other than communicating narrative information, or telling what happened. This is, of course, the quality that makes James’s later work look modernist, or writerly: the degree to which it draws our attention to its own textual procedure, rather than its represented fiction.²⁴ In different ways, Charles Caramello explains, James and Stein *both* “present acute cases of the tension between referentiality and autoreferentiality that has haunted formalist aesthetics in music, painting, and literature for more than a century. They are difficult, in sum, for the same general reasons that most modernist writers are difficult” (193).

This shift of emphasis from story to discourse, or from the narrated to the narrating, easily evokes an ethos of the present moment.²⁵ Indeed, the very word “modernism” seems to name an ascendancy of the present moment, deriving from the Latin *modo*, or “just now” (“modern”). But while some modernisms have certainly provoked audiences through their assertion of the “now” as such, this chapter has pursued a different temporality of outrageousness in James. Far from asserting the present, James’s texts operate as an explosive dispersion of the present, constantly reorienting the reader toward *other* temporal sites. In so doing, his texts simulate the spatial heterogeneity of theater; they become theatrical precisely by subverting presentness. Given this understanding, how do we make sense of Stein’s concerted effort to embrace the present in her writing? Must we find her “modernism” antithetical to James’s theatricality?

To arrive at this conclusion would mean shoring up a binary familiar from both literary and visual art criticism: theatricality on one side of an aesthetic divide and modernism on the other.²⁶ On the contrary, however, I claim that we can read key aspects of Stein’s modernist innovation *as* theatrical, in a sense that directly relates to Jamesian techniques. To make this argument, I begin by reviewing the discourse on Stein’s supposed antitheatricalism in light of her 1935 lecture “Plays,” in which she challenges

the very assumptions that make the antitheatricalist reading possible. I then turn to two of Stein's "landscape" plays: *Paisieu* (1928) and the surprising Broadway hit *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927, produced in 1934). It is true that Stein does not subject actuality to an all-out attack, as James does. But neither does her treasured "present" correspond to the present James tries to demolish. The unifying immediacy of drama's "*so ist es*" (Brecht) could not be farther from Stein's landscape; her "present" is not a communion with what is happening here and now, but a movement that splinters the here-and-now beyond recognition. For Stein, this is the promise and pleasure of theater: a fundamentally dispersive, discontinuous field.

Beyond Antitheatricality: "Plays"

The theater of James's texts, as we have been reading them, offers an alternative ground for understanding the theater of Stein's – alternative, that is, to the fundamentally *dramatic* sense of theater that seems to have grounded the interpretation of Stein's work as antitheatrical. If we align theatricality with "unities of space, time, [and] action," then Stein's "utterly broken and fragmentary stage," in works like *Four Saints in Three Acts*, must indeed seem antitheatrical (Puchner, *Stage* 109). But by treating the dramatic and the theatrical as separate concepts, we can begin to trace Stein's construction of an iconoclastic *but still emphatically theatrical* logic. James's writing in particular helps us see how theater is itself conducive to the "broken and fragmentary." Returning once more to Samuel Weber, we might say both James and Stein anticipate his argument that theatricality is the "*separability* of place 'itself'" (294): for the earlier writers too, theater is what *undermines* any attempt at spatial, temporal, or subjective "unity." The playhouse is a riotous space; dramatic continuity can only impose itself upon this space in an act of repressive violence. If Stein's plays institute a fragmentary experience, then, this need not be understood as an attack on the theater medium itself. On the contrary, Stein activates theater's own resources *in excess of* the integrating dramatic present. We might thus switch the terms of Martin Puchner's claim that Stein devised an "antitheatrical drama" (*Stage* 105): it's precisely when we look past the rules of drama that her theatricality becomes legible.

To begin with, Stein makes it clear that she understands the province of theater as utterly distinct from the narrative ambition basic to drama: "I concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play," she writes in "Plays" (73). Indeed, the fact that this sentence occurs in a lecture devoted to "Plays" might make us miss the breadth of its scope: it

articulates, not just a sense of theater, but a radical *theatricalism*, claiming not only that plays should not be stories, but that *anything* other than story can make for theater. This claim should encourage us to regard Stein's marking as "plays" some very un-play-like texts, not as an attack on theater's presumed integrity, but on the contrary as an aggressive expansion of theater into new realms. For example, the following text is from her 1928 piece *Paisieu: A Play*, which I'll discuss later in this chapter:

ACT ONE

Geronimo in season.

ACT ONE

Seasonable dishes.

Scorpions and butterflies and scorpions are
non-existent so she could be easy.

ACT ONE

Its beginning is twenty twenty-two.

Nobody counts poplars.

Nobody counts poplars.

Nobody.

Counts.

Poplars.

Nobody counts poplars as counts counts poplars.

Next. (15–6)

Although the piece preserves one remnant of dramatic form – the designation of "Acts" and, later, "Scenes" – it is not at all clear what exactly these terms designate. Needless to say, their repetition confounds their original function of marking progressive stages; the architecture of drama seems to have crumbled into found artifacts, to be rearranged at will. Perhaps more troubling is the fact that none of these lines are attributed to speakers, nor do they obviously describe onstage actions. Instead, they have the feel of a single, authorial discourse, not radically unlike the voice of non-"play" texts like 1914's *Tender Buttons*:

A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit. (4)

[...]

COLD CLIMATE.

A season in yellow sold extra strings makes lying places.

MALACHITE.

The sudden spoon is the same in no size. The sudden spoon is
the wound in the decision. (12)²⁷

Either of these pieces, like all Stein's work, is unsettling enough on its own. Regarded side-by-side, they bring the question of genre to a kind of crisis. "I think and always have thought that if you write a play you ought to announce that it is a play and that is what I did," she writes in "Plays," remarking as well: "I have written a great many plays and I am quite sure they are plays" (73, 69). What, she dares us to wonder, makes her so sure? By insisting that *Paisieu* is "A Play" while *Tender Buttons* is not (but presumably "could" have been²⁸), Stein challenges her readers to interrogate their assumptions about theater. Her "plays" are not plays in the sense that I will take up in subsequent chapters: they do not use familiar formal conventions to evoke the conflation of script and scene, and hence we are unlikely to feel that we are "seeing" *the* play as we read. Stein withholds this experience from her reader; by marking her texts as "plays" nevertheless, she produces a dissonance that goads the reader toward a new logic of staging. She assigns us the task of discovering what might make her works appropriate to performance. We have no legitimate basis, she argues, for assuming that such works cannot suit the stage.

Critics have been oddly eager to dismiss this provocation, however, and to apply more commonsense parameters of theatricality in judging Stein's work antitheatrical. Sarah Bay-Cheng helpfully suggests another approach, by situating Stein's work within the tradition of avant-garde performance. Yet Bay-Cheng also claims that Stein's "dramatic writings before 1920 are distinctive for their antitheatricalism . . . As many have argued previously, these early texts labeled 'plays' are not terribly stage-worthy (though numerous productions have been attempted)" (35).²⁹ I am not sure how one might distinguish an "attempted" production from, say, a fully accomplished one, although this kind of distinction consistently subtends such readings. Bay-Cheng disputes Puchner's account of Stein as a writer of closet drama, on the basis of his failure to note "the progression of Stein's drama over three decades" (48), but she approvingly quotes his statement that "[t]he transformations that were necessary for staging *Four Saints* can serve as a measure for the distance Stein's text maintains from the theater" (*Stage III*, qtd. in Bay-Cheng 54). It is not clear to me, however, that Virgil Thomson's active manipulations of Stein's text really constitute radical "transformations" of that text, nor that the particular interventions Thomson made "were necessary." Surely there are innumerable ways one could bring this play into production, which begin suggesting themselves the moment one approaches the text with that question in mind. To insist that Stein's collaborators had to *make* her script theatrical, as it were rescuing *Four Saints* from its own literariness, is to ignore another

possibility: that in such texts, Stein pursues theater itself beyond dramatic limits.

Jane Palatini Bowers, in her 1991 study *They Watch Me As They Watch This*, elucidates various ways in which Stein sets text and other aspects of performance in productive opposition. *Four Saints*, for instance, “counteracts the very performance it initiates in a kind of counter-text, a written text which asserts itself at every moment of performance” (48), while 1936’s *Listen to Me* is “a collision that [Stein] engineers” between “conception and its projected enactment” (91). Bowers’s analysis is strongest where it presents Stein’s texts as *engaging* theatrical performance in order to investigate its possibilities and impossibilities in a kind of immanent critique. The “adamantly and self-consciously ‘literary’” quality of these plays (2) emerges, as Bowers shows, through their orientation toward, anticipation of, and (sometimes) realization in theater. In many places, Bowers’s readings provide an inspiring precedent for my own project: in showing the ways in which these texts at once demand and resist enactment (as, for example, in her wonderful consideration of verbs in the early plays [17–19]), she is revealing what I would call their negative theatrics. In these moments, Bowers shows Stein exploiting specific formal possibilities inherent in the medium. For example: “In the theater the forward march of time is inexorable,” but it is equally true that the “flow of speech and action is checked, as it were, by the way the eye perceives performance in space – instant by instant. Really then, the dynamism of performance . . . is at once continuous and discontinuous” (49–50). Thus *Four Saints*, far from ignoring the “reality” of performance, simply “emphasizes the discontinuity of performance rather than its continuity” (50).³⁰ With this formulation, Bowers neatly preempts much of the discourse on “antitheatrical” Stein.

Ultimately, Bowers concludes that Stein’s plays are “a performed poetry, at once textual and theatrical” (135). At other points in her argument, however, she seems unduly bound by dramatic norms, as when she characterizes Stein’s *A Play Called Not and Now*, in which “No one acts; nothing happens; no one speaks,” as accordingly “a play that cannot play in the theater” (91). Similarly, while her claim that Stein’s *A List* asserts “the primacy of the written text . . . over the performance text” is suggestively Adornian, it rests on the problematic argument that some of the play’s clarity would be lost in performance (31–32). Bowers writes that “[o]nly the written text can set us straight” if, for instance, we hope to follow Stein’s extensive play with homophones like “for” and “four” (ibid.). But as we

have seen, being “set straight” is a specifically dramatic requirement. In Stein, such ambiguities are not brakes on theatrical performance, but projections of a theater where meaning is never available to a synoptic gaze, where we are always being invited to zig and zag between different possibilities. The sound that might either be “for” or “four” *is* theatrical in this sense: the word never stops referring to its own alternatives, or “other parts.” If written text is ascendant here, its primacy lies not in correcting performance, but in anticipating and providing for this dynamic.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I try to explicate the logic of Stein’s fundamentally discontinuous theater. This reading should unseat the conception that her work is antagonistic toward theatrical performance. Still, the “Plays” lecture does seem to provide ample justification for the claim that Stein shows at least a “conflicted relation to the theater” (Puchner, *Stage* 102). In particular, Stein objects to the “nervousness” she associates with many of her experiences at the theater, a discomfort she ascribes to the “syncopated time” that arises between spectator and spectacle (“Plays” 58–59). As if in response to the same sense of theater we’ve traced in James, Stein here records an agitating discontinuity. This feeling arises for her, before the show has even begun, from the sight of the curtain: “the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain” (59). The potentially disruptive presence of other viewers compounds the effect: “the audience and the fact that they are or will be or will not be in the way when the curtain goes up that too makes for nervousness and nervousness is the certain proof that the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together” (ibid.). Stein seems acutely aware of everything *but* the drama that is to be presented, beset by the space and time of theater as a matrix of disparities. This is, as I have been repeating, a specifically Jamesian experience; similarly, when Stein writes that “before it had commenced it was over” (71), she could just as well be describing the anachronic Jamesian “scene.” And yet the two writers’ confluence is far from complete: Stein *objects* to the theatrical discomfiture James had ultimately embraced. We might therefore wonder if Stein’s “nervousness” implies a renewed dramatic impulse to centralize the stage.

It would be convenient for my argument if “Plays” told the story of Stein learning to embrace the theatrical “nervousness” she describes: the spatial discontinuity embodied by the curtain, and the temporal discontinuity of “syncopated time.”³¹ Instead, however, her lecture continues to treat these

features as problems: “This thing, the fact *that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play* is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play,” she writes, “because not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it *does not need to be so*” (58, my emphases). For Stein, as for dramatic authors, the bifurcation between the audience and the play is a problem that must be creatively *overcome*. By repeatedly casting the problem in the terms that “there is a thing to know,” however, she also seems to luxuriate in the critical task thus generated, suggesting a desire to dwell on the theatrical terrain where this conceptual “thing” is “there” to engage her.³²

Puchner claims that Stein tries to solve the problem of the “two times” through “the attempt to import [the] quality of synchronized reading into the dramatic form,” since “[i]t is only in private and ideal circumstances, Stein and so many modernists argue, that a perfect synchronicity between story and the affective reader can be achieved” (*Stage* 102). As we observed earlier, however, Stein by no means regards the written-and-read medium as a guarantee of “perfect synchronicity.” In “Plays,” she suggests that theatrical syncopation has its analog in the realm of reading: “in a book it is always a strange doubling, the familiarity between the characters in the book is a progressive familiarity and the familiarity between them and the reader is a familiarity that is a forcing process . . . It makes of course a double time [. . .]” (67). Ridding the written text of *its* “two times” is for Stein an ambition as necessary, and as new, as the corresponding project for theater. It is clear, therefore, that the solution to theatrical syncopation will not simply consist in writing plays meant to stay on the page.

And indeed, Stein goes on to describe an irreducibly *theatrical* model for this reform: the experience of going, in her youth, to see Sarah Bernhardt’s company. “[I]t was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so french I could rest in it untroubled. And I did . . . It was better than the theatre because you did not have to get acquainted” (71). This theater was “better than *the* theatre” – that is, the theater as normative, and as normally available to young Gertrude. It was, therefore, barely recognizable *as* theater, much as innovative forms (as Stein herself knew) generally go unrecognized.³³ And yet it succeeded for her, as theater, precisely by being “foreign”: by keeping its distance, offering an alternative to the normal sociality of “the theatre.” The repeated “all” (“all so foreign . . . all being so french”) emphasizes the spatially distributed copia of performance, just as the

“voice being so varied” describes the temporally differential experience of Bernhardt’s virtuosity. Of course the performance might, on its own terms, have been the height of drama; but it is precisely the freedom from *taking* it on its own terms – from having to get acquainted – that Stein celebrates here. Nor does this distance have anything to do with a “fourth wall”; on the contrary, Stein’s pleasure ensues from her own elimination of the dramatic fiction, which opens a space for her to “rest in.”

Stein thus describes a theatrical sensibility that arises first with her own *in situ* revision of other artists’ work. Not only “french” or “foreign” plays are susceptible to this reshaping, moreover: the Bernhardt play “awakened in me a desire for melodrama on the stage, because there again everything happened so quietly one did not have to get acquainted and as what people felt was of no importance one did not have to realize what was said”; her favorite melodramas “made the whole stage the whole play . . . silence stillness and quick movement” (72). Here again, Stein blithely dispenses with the play’s own self-conception – imagine a melodrama for which “what people felt was of no importance”! Restaging these works as a kind of abstract ballet, what Stein excises is not theater as such, but the centralizing emotional coercion of *dramatic* theater. By refusing to let the melodramas engage her on the Aristotelian level of sympathetic fiction, she is able to enjoy the sensory qualities of the performance. Thus reimaged, “the whole play” is dispersed over “the whole stage.” Theater is valuable as a sensory panoply (“all so foreign”) that can add up to a powerful impression *without* imposing the continuities either of human interest or of discursive meaning (of “realiz[ing] what was said”). By “eliminating progression” (Davy 116), Stein’s kind of theater abandons not its own theatricality but the dramatic *unification* of theater’s spaces and times.

In her girlhood, Stein found her “desire” “awakened” when theater’s dimensional copia could manifest itself outside narrative compulsion. The “clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around” are, for Stein, “things over which one stumbles *over which one stumbled*” (“Plays” 71, my emphasis): the shift in verb tense is decisive. Costume, sound, text, and movement remain to Stein as the heterogeneous “things” of theater, that is, but one *no longer* stumbles over them – provided one has found a way to stop the headlong vector of progressive dramatic narrative.³⁴

Negativity beyond Contradiction: Paisieu's Differential Landscape

Clearly, then, Stein does not object to theatrical multiplicity in itself. What bothers her is rather the experience of that multiplicity jarring against the expectation of continuous unity. Stein's desire to overcome the "two times" of theater is not a pseudodramatic intolerance of discontinuity or discrepancy as such. The problem of the two times is rather that they keep theater trapped in a binary struggle. The conflict between drama's demand for immediacy and theater's own dimensions of distance crowds out the differential pleasures of the *variously* discontinuous experience that results when dramatic expectations are released altogether. Accordingly, Stein's solution is perhaps less to prescribe a drama of "perfect synchronicity" (Puchner, *Stage* 102) than to remove the dramatic ideal itself. Temporal syncopation and spatial separation stop being problems once we set aside the standards from which they deviate: continuous immersion, maintained by narrative momentum, in drama's "absolute" present (Szondi), and the unbroken togetherness of a theater that demands we "get acquainted." Stein's problem is not with theater's multiplicity but, so to speak, with its *duplicity*, the way her experience of its phenomenal disposition contradicts its prevailing norms. If the viewer can come to accept theater as a panoply of differentially distributed contents – and herself as one alien among others – then a maddening bifurcation will dissolve into a texture of potentially infinite, nonexclusive variants. Stein initiates this process, in "Plays," by developing a contentedly alien persona: the young woman we see at the theater seems utterly immune to twenty-two hundred years of dramatic expectations and desires, rather as if she had just dropped in from outer space.

In thus dismissing drama altogether, Stein does indeed move away from the twoness she had noticed in "Henry James." She also announces a mode of nondramatic theatrical pleasure quite unlike the one we have traced in James's work. For him, theater emerges as a difference or "descent" from drama's centralizing ideal. In this mode of theater, drama never disappears completely; instead, it is perpetually subjected to subversion, distraction, and rupture. In fact, as we saw in the Jamesian device of the "disrupted image," the "stream" of dramatic action can itself be mobilized to produce theater as against the stasis of the pictorial. It is the violent interplay between drama and "other parts" of the playing space that produces theatrical pleasure for James. For Stein, by contrast, theater's essential operation is not the interposition of disruption and disparity *between* drama and its others but, instead, the cultivation of difference *within* an

already-decentralized perceptual field. The delights of this theater are exploratory and, as it were, distributive – a rhizomatic pleasure of lateral textures, as compared to the more oedipal pleasure of chopping away at dramatic tradition’s towering tree.³⁵ In Stein, Bonnie Marranca writes, one is “continually absorbed by the pleasure of tracing the endless diverging lines impressed upon constantly transforming surfaces, and at every turn discovering winding, wider pathways leading to ever more mysterious corridors of experience” (24). The difference that structures this theater is not fundamentally a force of opposition. Rather, to quote *Tender Buttons* again: “The difference is spreading” (3).

Jamesian theater thus ceaselessly contends with dramatic and narrative norms, while Stein’s theater simply discards them. This difference typifies the authors’ respective senses of their own relation to literary tradition more broadly: “James was preoccupied with his predecessors and with himself as their terminal point, Stein with herself as successor and as originator of a new lineage” (Caramello 20). But the distinction also speaks to the sharply different facts of their respective theatrical careers. If James painfully came to release his long-held dream of being a prominent playwright (Edel 55, 108, 115), Stein’s biography shows something like the opposite trajectory: theatrical success at sixty, followed by twelve more years of work addressed to the stage. So the logic that led us to explore James’s prose fiction as a kind of refuge for his renegade theatricality – which neither the institutional theater of his day nor his own dramatic standards could accommodate within playwrighting – does not apply to Stein, who continues to insist that her pieces can actually “play.” A theatrical reformer at long distance, she sought to provide for a radically new theater, one that would correspond to her singular experiences of some of the old. James, much more deeply invested than Stein in existing theater, maintains his theatricality as a negative relation to the dramatic: divergence and distraction, his various techniques of fracturing the narrative present. These techniques simulate the “stumbling” Stein sees as expendable, since her theater will simply eliminate the dramatic norm such divergence is *from*. As Ryan remarks, “Ibsen did not exist for her” (1); dramaturgically speaking, neither did Aristotle.³⁶

In the empty space created by this full-scale eviction of precedent, Stein decided to construct “a play [that] was exactly like a landscape” (“Plays” 75). Stein’s “landscape plays” are like nothing James would have recognized as theater – and yet they proceed from an intuition of theater as a differential space of riotous multiplicity, an intuition we can recognize

as Jamesian. Included in Stein's notion of landscape is the sense that these plays will provide their own context, establish their own terrain; unlike Strether's *paysage* in *The Ambassadors*, these landscapes will not find themselves perforated by someone else's "drama." But this is because they perforate themselves: they are already structured as a network of incommensurabilities. We should not mistake Stein's espousal of "untroubled" pleasure for a dismissal of negativity altogether. Rather, her plays generate their own theatrical negativity internally, precisely because they no longer have a dramatic norm against which to react. A part of Stein's job therefore consists in *manifesting* the negative, giving it the substance of a topographical feature. This occurs quite literally in the opening lines of *Paisieu: A Play*:

Not Paisieu a play.
 Arbuthnot or hollowed is constant eggs and grasped.
 Failure in white clouds.
 Arbuthnot
 Geronimo (155)

The first line seems flatly to deny its own premises. But this cheekiness is really a kind of showing-off: the play will be capacious enough to accommodate its own negation, which becomes a generative moment *within* it. Although the lines in *Paisieu* are not attributed to characters, I find it particularly rewarding to imagine this statement spoken by a performer, as if correcting the assumptions of an audience who, perhaps, hold programs emblazoned with the very referent being denied (and created). The question that would then arise is not just "then what is it?" but also "then where am I?", a question to which we would at once know *and* not know the answer: we are in Stein's landscape, a field that harbors incommensurable alternatives simultaneously. The second line enacts this tension through its translation of "or" into "and," as well as through the outrageous zeugma of each pair of terms, held together only at great strain: "Arbuthnot or hollowed," "constant eggs and grasped." The play thus alerts us that its challenge will be to perceive radically *different* terms *together*. As Andrzej Wirth observes, Stein enacts a "splintering [*Zersplitterung*] of language, whose fragments ('bits') let themselves align with different constellations of meaning" ("Gertrude" 67). Her procedure will be, to use Stein's own words, "a combination and not a contradiction" ("Plays" 58; cf. Schultz, "Combination") – but despite the "eggs," a combination that refuses to emulsify.

To support this radical heterogeneity, the negative emerges as a phenomenon operative within the perceptual field, rather than as its limit: the “other parts” of Jamesian theater are, for Stein, already *here*. Accordingly, the first word – “Not” – becomes “Arbuthnot,” the name of a definite historical entity. John Arbuthnot was an eighteenth-century doctor and satirist, friendly with Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope; but more important than this particular association, I think, is the sense Stein conveys of the “not” as a fundamentally mobile quantity, now negating phenomena and now filling them out. Things “are, but not”: the “not” is a modification, not a cancelation, of their being.³⁷ “Arbuthnot” then becomes “Geronimo,” the improbable surname of a family whose members will become, if not the play’s characters, the subjects and objects of much of its language. Stein’s negative doesn’t erase the world, but populates it. We may start out with the expectation that these “nots” will yield to a “but . . .,” but by withholding the negative’s negative, Stein retrains us to regard the “no” as a phenomenon in its own right, equal in status with the objects it negotiates. In the same way, “Failure” is no longer an attribute *of* something (“white clouds”) but manifests as an element “in” an arrangement, a compositional feature in itself. Negativity operates here not as binary opposition, nor even as dialectical negation, but as the ongoing parsing of specificities within a fundamentally accommodating field. “There is no no in no,” Stein writes in her 1936 play *Listen To Me* (419); negativity doesn’t cancel or transcend itself here, but – as it were – nests.

That the negative has a place *within* Stein’s theatrical world returns us to the question we encountered earlier: how should we understand Stein’s conviction that “The business of Art [. . .] is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present” (“Plays” 65)? I’ve been arguing for a tradition of “negative theatrics” that treats the present not as an ideal but as a problem; that operates by, in various ways, negating its own actuality. Must we place Stein entirely outside this tradition? Marranca suggests as much when she claims that Stein’s “affirmation of life, untouched by modern and at times fashionable alienation, is a joyous modernism” (20). This kind of observation certainly speaks to a real affective difference between Stein and the other writers treated in this study. But as we have already begun to see, Stein’s difficult work effects an “alienation” of its own; and whatever “affirmation of life” she may evoke, I think the life of her language is far too various to support any totalizing affirmation *or* negation.³⁸ There is thus no question of *attacking* the present, as in James. Nor is Stein’s

negative theatricality a *determinate negation* of the actual, as we will see in the more obviously alienated Beckett; rather, hers is a fundamentally differential, ramifying movement, within a present too complex to brook totalizing rejection.

And yet Stein's landscape, like those of James and Beckett both, unfurls at the expense of any phenomenal immediacy. In fact, even in the above sentence about "The business of Art," Stein's words multiply in a manner that undermines the "complete actual present" to which they refer. Characteristically courting redundancy at every turn, this sentence produces a discursive present which is never "complete," but submits to continual adjustment and elaboration. The nested emphases of the phrase "complete actual present," as well as its repetition, promote a heightened sensitivity to each word's distinctiveness, each time it occurs, while at the same time creating a system of echoes. This is language hard at work disabling any synthesizing moment of uptake. Its present is *not* the "complete," absolute present of drama; rather, it is divided and provisional, constantly yielding to supplementary excavations.³⁹

Stein's theater operates this way too. Her landscapes preempt the dramatic "*so ist es*" by investing every word with its own vector of movement: there can be no single surface of reception, no point at which to converge. Between Scene III and Scene IV of *Paisieu's* first act, we find:

Scene in preciseness
 Whole button come can couple with all division in
 antics of required lame and dew.
 Germaine and her child.
 Germaine and her child. (159)

Here again, Stein's "preciseness" consists of acknowledging the *difference made* by increments of space and time. If it is not enough to say something once, this is because the stage is continually criss-crossed by microcurrents of difference, such that no moment's content can be identical to the last. This is not, as many have claimed, a poetics of "stasis."⁴⁰ Rather, it is a theatrics for which the passage of time and the shifting disposition of space emphatically *count*. If one were to stage this passage, one might bring the lights up on a woman and a child, then dim them, then bring them up again; the audience would experience a tableau divided from itself (a "couple with all division"?). Repetition here is not an attempt to impose "synchronicity," but a display of fundamental variation: "A matter of fact is that there is a blue sky of different colors. A blue sky of different colors"

(*Paisieu* 159). Or again, on the next page: “It is the difference between very quickly and very quickly” (160).

It’s tempting, once again, to regard such lines as invitations to staging: just think of all the ways performance could produce “the difference between” two iterations of the same phrase. Certainly these lines instance the *invitation to co-creation* that so many have found in Stein: “Whatever you find” in her plays “depends on your own way of looking” (Marranca 7). Far from being unstageable, that is, Stein’s texts are uniquely appropriate to theater as a collaborative medium. But the theatricality of these lines goes beyond their appeal to creative collaboration. Already on the page, they exhibit and promote a sense of language as spatially and/or temporally distributed: one “very quickly” is different from the other “very quickly” because there are two of them, that is, because they occupy different places on the page simultaneously, or because they occupy two distinct moments of writing or reading. By emphatically occupying a particular position, each word exceeds the signification that makes it the same word wherever it is. Stein thus emphasizes the way words can take up space and time. “Stein treats her words as though they are material objects related to each other spatially, that is, visually on the page and sonorously in the air,” Bowers writes (26). The word becomes thinglike, in the sense Stein identifies elsewhere: “a thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it” (*Writings* 103). As in the Jamesian parlor, these “things” arrange themselves to the consternation of any sublimating gaze.

If Stein’s theater text beckons collaborators’ innovation, then, it also demonstrates writing’s ability to *stage itself*—an effect that aligns it with the more formally conventional playwriting we’ll encounter in subsequent chapters. In Stein, the effect of self-staging occurs through the use of repetition, but also through her work with parts of speech—in particular, her refusal to let “little” words play a merely supporting role in the construction of sense.⁴¹ Prepositions and other inconspicuous terms swell with a newfound materiality:

Disuse of in between. (*Paisieu* 158)

[. . .]

To be called to be. (161)

[. . .]

Thanks for it as in by kept call. (162)

“To be called to be” is, we might say, the state of such words in Stein—and the state of the playscript in general. By summoning these words to

positivity, Stein's syntax simulates the theatrical vector that thrusts text into the actual. But it would be wrong to assume that the newly emphatic presence of words like "in," "to," and "by" corresponds to an ideal of absolute, immediate being – "purely present existence . . . directly and immediately perceived" (Ryan 37). The positivity being foisted on these words is not something that "purely" or "directly" *happens*; instead, their new substantiality feels burdensome, like a mission the small words – or our imaginations – can't quite discharge. Numerous readings of Stein bear witness to this difficulty, which often leads critics (I don't exclude myself) to make "sense" of her works by bracketing the very words she wants us to notice. Thus, for instance, Pamela Hadas cites a passage from *Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother* that includes the sentence "This was the remainder of *there were having been or being* any martyr" and notes: "Leo [Stein] might easily have seen himself as a martyr" (66, my emphasis). The temptation of reference interferes with our perception of precisely those words Stein wants to make us see, words whose very impropriety should discourage us from trying to "get acquainted." These words exist *among* the others without qualifying or reducing them; they do not coalesce, via signification, into a unity. And this coexistence of terms in undecidable relation – in a relation that only yields determinate meaning at the cost of active exclusion or reduction – anticipates theater's ability to dispose things (and people) in an unresolvable sensory multiplicity.

The (Dis)continuous Present: Four Saints in Three Acts

The second subtitle of *Paisieu* is "A Work of Pure Imagination in which No Reminiscences Intrude." This description, like many passages throughout Stein's writing, seems to announce an unquestioning dedication to the present; but as we have seen, Stein consistently troubles the very immediacy she announces. If "No Reminiscences Intrude" upon her theatrical landscape, this does not yield a dramatic "absolute present," with spectator and spectacle plunged into the unity of the here-and-now. Rather, the play distributes itself through a structure of relays and echoes:

There are passes in a mountain and if a tree can be used they will put it where they are.

Leave where they went. Leaves are where they are where they went.

Leaves where they went. (176–177)

It is true that the utter unpredictability of this language, its freedom from narrative or discursive logics such as that of "reminiscence," compels our

attention to each moment of the text anew. But we risk mischaracterizing the particular consistency of these moments if we adopt the vocabulary of the “present” too quickly. Especially treacherous is Stein’s own term for her aesthetics: the famous “continuous present,” which she mentions repeatedly in the lecture “Composition as Explanation” (*Writings* 21–30). With this term, as with the subtitle of *Paisieu*, Stein espouses a refusal to ground language in the authority of what has been or will be. Only a sustained attention to the present in its uniqueness, she suggests, can ward off the reifying force of convention.⁴² By calling her present “continuous,” Stein emphasizes the ongoing dedication and perpetually renewed effort this project demands. And yet what determines the present, for her, is precisely the perceptual *absence* of continuity. As Wirth observes, Stein’s continuous present entails the “abandonment of the chronological linearity of succession and progression” (“Gertrude” 71). What is “continuous” about it is only that the singular moment *perpetually refuses* to situate itself among its precursors and successors. To experience presentness in this sense is exactly not to experience continuity.

Stein’s “continuous present,” in other words, is not only an experience of rupture, “a gap, where past and future . . . are momentarily unhooked” (Stewart 39). It is also a concept that redoubles this gap as the disjuncture between theory (the “continuous present” as a *term*) and creative or receptive practice (the experience to which the term refers), marking the discontinuous work off from the discourse that formalizes its procedure as “continuous.” This present, in other words, not only displays but perpetuates a constitutive disparity. This explains why Stein would forego the textual conventions of drama, which use recognizable conventions to imply the structure of a performance event: for her, the promise of each writerly choice lies in the way it *doesn’t* accord with a predictable structure, or extend a causal logic. The title of her 1927 play *Four Saints in Three Acts* gives a nod to dramatic convention, but it also conveys a sense of disjuncture: how will *four* saints fit into *three* acts, without something sticking out? As one scene heading puts it: “Could Four Acts be Three” (462)?

Indeed, once the play gets under way, we find Stein’s eccentric arithmetic operating directly in service of a triumphant *discontinuity*. As in many of her plays, Stein employs Acts and Scenes out of sequence, conveying her commitment to a language that determines its own procedures anew at every (dis)juncture. But *Four Saints*’ obsession with number goes beyond this characteristic Steinism. The phrase “How many” arises again and again, and – as has frequently been observed – seems to emerge as a question about the text’s own production:

Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.

Saint Therese. There are very many many saints in it.

Saint Therese. There are as many saints as there are in it. (*Four* 458)

[...]

Saint Therese. How many windows and doors and floors are there in it. (463)

[...]

How many saints are there in it.

How many saints are there in it.

How many acts are there in it.

[...]

How many Acts are there in it.

Four Acts. (478)

These questions of number emphasize multiplicity, implying that the important determinations of textual production and reception are choices among infinite alternatives, rather than between binary options – and that these choices can be made anew at each moment: “It is very necessary to have arithmetic inestimably” (479). Defiantly inestimable, Stein’s numbers are *not* the signs of an inevitable succession. She treats the sequence of “natural numbers” – normally the privileged register of the *a priori* – as manipulable verbal material, their sensory qualities rising to prominence:

One two three all out but me.

One two three four all out but four

One two all about but you. (*ibid.*)

Number is de-idealized; we are asked to imagine it as equal among the other features of a verbal landscape, rather than as an *a priori* category that would structure a work in advance. “Scene VII” is thus followed by “Scene Eight” (458–460): numbering is an act of language that must be renewed each time with a conscious, discontinuous gesture. The implication, consonant with Stein’s model of radical independence from tradition (rather than perpetual rebellion against it), is that *nothing* need be taken for granted: we are free to reimagine not only the rules of grammar, but the grammar of experience itself.⁴³ Thus, for example, in Act I, “Scene IV” is followed by “Act Two,” “Scene One,” “Scene One,” and “Act One” before we reach “Scene V” (453–454); in Act II “Scene V” occurs nine times in a row, each time with a different content (456–457). Act I’s “Scene VIII” reads simply: “Saint Therese in time” (454). Time itself has become an empirical, malleable, topographical feature.⁴⁴ Stein refuses simply to mark time’s passing; rather, she posits time – like the negative – as a member of the perceptual field, subject to (and of) unpredictable divagations and specificities.

Does this kind of usage deny the inherent temporal conditions of performance? Are these tricks that only “work” on the page? Yes, if we assume “the spatial and temporal continuity of the theater” (Puchner, *Stage* 110); but again, this is just the assumption Stein’s insights consistently unsettle. As “Plays” makes clear, dramatic conventions don’t always succeed in organizing our theatrical experience as a seamless passage of time. This means that, for instance, the familiar sequence of Act I, Act II, Act III may itself turn out to be “unstageable,” since it implies a linear continuity that the heterogeneity of theatrical space, and our perceptual existence in *relation* to it, can always subvert. We should not, therefore, simply dismiss the possibility of staging the kind of event Stein’s texts demand, or assume that such passages are being pragmatically “transformed” when we adapt them for performance. Rather, we need to take these features seriously as reminders that theatrical production *can’t count on* the continuity for which dramatic structure aims. No longer assumed to be the constant vector that sublimates spatial heterogeneity into meaning, time fissures into a multiplicity of its own.

If in *The Ambassadors* Strether’s countryside landscape explodes its own pictorial integrity through the movement of the “others” it has harbored, Stein’s landscapes never present themselves as integral in the first place: discontinuity is the principle of their formation. “I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play,” she writes in “Plays,” “because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there” (75). Stein is not claiming that the landscape play is immediately and entirely accessible, simply “there” for us in a rapturous continuity of life and art once the interference of the fourth wall has been removed. Rather, she acknowledges in landscape an asymmetry between subject and spectacle, through the latter’s carefully cultivated independence: “it” does not have to return your attentions. The following lines from *Four Saints* seem to imitate this configuration:

A pleasure April fool’s day a pleasure.
 Saint Therese seated.
 Not April fool’s day a pleasure.
 Saint Therese seated.
 Not April fool’s day a pleasure.
 Saint Therese seated. (*Four* 445)

The lines about “April fool’s day” pursue a train of thought with which the tableau of “Saint Therese seated,” in its impassive repetition, seems utterly unconcerned. Stein thus celebrates the way a composition can abide, impervious, while the mind busies itself in rumination. “What is the difference between a picture and pictured,” says the text a few pages later (452); that difference, which had caused such a disturbance in Stein’s early theatergoing experience, has now become the very terrain of her theatrical landscaping. The dramatic work entices us with the promise of emotional confluence, then fails to accommodate – has no space for – our perceptual idiosyncrasy, as the curtain itself seems tacitly to admit. The landscape, however, doesn’t dog us with the offer of “acquaintance,” of mutual recognition, of fellow-feeling, then punish us when our singular perceptual apparatus shifts us out of line. Instead, it opens out into expanded possibilities of relation between essentially discontinuous elements – elements among which we can therefore place ourselves. “[T]he landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail” Stein writes in “Plays” (77): the sky itself, no longer an all-encircling dome guaranteeing unity (and symbolizing the “unities”), becomes subject to differentiation as its relational possibilities multiply.⁴⁵ Similarly, Strether’s heightened awareness of a shifting “engagement with others” is what makes his landscape theatrical, makes him perceive it *as* theater “at bottom.” In Stein as in James, landscape becomes theater when we perceive it, not as the continuous extension of life as we (already) know it, but as a system of relations *with others*, relations built on constitutive disparities that keep space and significance open.

Saint Therese and Saint Therese and Saint Therese.

Many saints as seen and in between as many saints as seen.

[. . .]

Saint Therese and sound. (*Four* 448)

[. . .]

Saint Therese can know the difference between singing and women. Saint Therese can know the difference between snow and thirds. Saint Therese can know the difference between when there is a day to-day to-day. To-day. (453)

Just as Saint Therese appears multiply divided from herself, so the saints “as seen” seem to harbor a fleet of others “between” them, in a multifarious agglomeration of what we see and what we don’t. “Saint Therese and sound” recommends precisely the kind of theatrical attention that will

appreciate irreducibly different media (the corporeal, the aural) *without* synthesizing them: like the saint, we “can know the difference between” these features of experience by entertaining them, strangely, together. And as the end of the second passage above reminds us, “the difference between” can always insert itself where no *two things* were evident. In fact, this “difference” can wedge itself into the very consistency of the present: the fact that “there is a day to-day.” Stein’s usage seems to delight in the standard hyphen that keeps “to-day” in pieces.

The landscape play’s perpetual inscription of discrepancies between “any detail” and “any other detail” thus extends to the theatrical present itself. This present bears no resemblance to the absolute present of drama; Stein’s plays grasp and magnify the heterogeneity that dramatic narrative tries to reduce. Because these pieces look more like Stein’s other experimental texts than like plays as we usually encounter them, many readers have concluded that Stein was uninterested in, or even downright hostile toward, the particularity of the theater medium. It is true that *Paisieu* is no more a drama than *Tender Buttons*; but to forsake drama is not necessarily to reject the theatrical itself. Far from eviscerating theater of its medial specificity, Stein’s insistence that “anything that was not a story could be a play” demonstrates her rigorously *expansive* approach to theater. This far-flung definition indicates not a lack of interest in the properly theatrical, but a desire to destabilize that “properly” – and in particular, to leave its dramatic investments in continuity, unity, and immediacy far behind. Nor can it be maintained that Stein’s work becomes “theatrical” only in hindsight: James, her avowed “forerunner,” had set a precedent for her landscapes in the disruptive, dispersive spaces of his own scenic poetics.

These readings have tried to show how two modernist *writers*, whose uncompromising literariness has sometimes seemed to thrive on a rejection of the theatrical, were in fact using writing to pursue and proliferate the theater they loved – a theater whose manifold elements perpetually retreat from, and interfere with, drama’s totalizing display. The shift to a theater beyond drama plays out within the formal structures of their texts. Once we recognize this dynamic, it becomes harder to maintain that theatrical experimentation must belong to the stage *as distinct from* the page. In James and Stein, writing enacts specifically theatrical evasions, subversions, and ruptures of its own. This theatrical capacity still inspires some of today’s writers; and it helps solve the baffling riddle of the contemporary playwright, who perversely chooses to approach performance through the medium of text. In Part II of this book, I’ll explore the work of two

contemporary playwrights who, though much closer than Stein to traditional forms of playwriting, nonetheless extend her emphasis on theater as a radically differential medium. These writers pursue Stein's intuition that "there is something much more exciting than anything that happens" (*Writings* 113), an excitement whose theatrical ramifications we have also traced in James. And indeed, like James, Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman maintain pleasurable violent relations with the dramatic norm; for them, the moment when Stein's theater could imagine itself thoroughly "untroubled" by drama's ideals belongs to a different modernism.

In between Stein's landscape plays and the landscape of contemporary playwriting, however, there arises another kind of textual scene: "*A country road. A tree. / Evening.*" In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the very idea of landscape will come to feel laughably insufficient to the horror at hand: "You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!" (207). Beckett's foreclosure of landscape corresponds to a theatrical attitude toward the present that differs, once again, from either James's or Stein's. In Beckett, the absolute present of drama reasserts itself with a vengeance; the reification of "how it is" becomes a compositional obsession. Determined to exacerbate the text's complicity with the here-and-now of performance, however, Beckett thereby inscribes a rigorously utopian movement, which transcends actuality through the very determination to manifest it. Before passing on to the theater of our era, we need to spend some time on the well-worn terrain of *Godot* and its vexing relationship to the actual. For Beckett's theater there is no longer "a blue sky of different colors" (Stein, *Paisieu* 159); there is only a sky "like any sky at this hour of the day" (Beckett, *Waiting* 121). This is a theater for which the heterogeneity of the stage no longer promises difference, or rupture. The prospect is bleak; but as we will see, in turning to meet the terrible *continuity* of "this hour," Beckett will draw theater's writing into the breathtaking stringency of a negative dialectic.