

PSYCHIATRY

Gertrude Stein Explained

Puzzling Writer Once Was Student of Münsterberg At Harvard Where She Studied Automatic Writing

By JANE STAFFORD

"POPCOCK!" said Gertrude Stein. With this unusually lucid and brief remark the writer who has grown famous for her "a rose is a rose is a rose" style dismissed recent efforts of scientists to explain her work.

"Popcock is popcock is science is popcock," Miss Stein might have been expected to say. But she did not, according to the report. For once, she failed to repeat herself or to bewilder her hearers.

The scientific explanation is that her writing is done with her wrist and not with her mind. Automatic writing is the scientific term for it. Miss Stein not only disagrees, but takes the view that her writing does not need explaining.

If you have seen her play, "Four Saints in Three Acts," or have read any of her other strange writings, you probably feel that she needs as much explaining as that other famous "stein"—Einstein—who also always draws a capacity crowd but whom hardly anyone in the audience understands.

In giving the scientific explanation for Miss Stein's literary productions, the editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association starts with a question that has undoubtedly occurred to you as you read her work.

Reduced to everyday speech, he asks, is she "kidding" her readers or is her stuff just "nerfs?"

Familiar to Psychiatrists

He points out that her type of writing is familiar to psychiatrists as one symptom of certain mental disorders. This makes him wonder whether "the literary abnormalities in which she indulges represent correlated distortions of the intellect or whether the entire performance is in the nature of a hoax and that Miss Stein produces her literary effusions with her tongue in her cheek."

Taking for granted that she is not writing with her tongue in her cheek, what kind of mental distortion or "nut-tiness" is she indulging in and why does she write that way?

Scientists have a number of long

words to describe the strange way people with disordered minds sometimes write and talk—the way which is similar to Miss Stein's writings. Automatic writing—apparently letting the wrist do the work instead of the mind—is one of these psychological terms. Palilalia, perseveration and verbigeration are the others.

"Palilalia," explains the editor of the medical journal, "is a form of speech disorder in which the patient repeats many times a word, a phrase or a sentence which he has just uttered. In addition, the speech tends to be uttered more and more quickly and less distinctly."

He gives as an example of this the case of a man at a movie who found himself reading aloud the captions of the films over and over again. In the days of silent picture, this seemed to be a fairly common affliction, but the people who may have annoyed you in this way were probably not all suffering from palilalia. The man in this case could not stop. His wife who was with him became annoyed, jabbed him in the ribs and told him to "shut up." The poor man could only answer.

"Can't Shut Up"

"I can't shut up. I can't shut up. I can't shut up."

This went on until he eventually did shut up because his speech became inaudible. This patient was suffering from the mental disturbance which sometimes follows an attack of epidemic encephalitis, or "sleeping sickness" as it is popularly called.

Comparable to this palilalia is palilogia, the kind of writing in which a word or sentence is deliberately repeated in order to emphasize it. Something like this, but not the same, is verbal perseveration, in which the same word or phrase is repeated, not for the purpose of emphasis, but as though the original idea persisted in the speaker's mind for an undue length of time, keeping fresh ideas from entering. Perseveration, of course, is not normal and is a symptom of mental disorder.

Sometimes patients afflicted with dif-

ficulty in expressing themselves repeat the statements or questions put to them, instead of answering or commenting. This is called echolalia.

Finally, in the mental disease, dementia precox, the patient repeats the same sentence over and over again. The layman as well as the physician recognizes this as the sign of a disordered mind. The condition is known as verbigeration.

It is the automatic writing—writing whatever comes to your fingertips without effort—that is interesting in connection with Gertrude Stein. Automatic writing furnishes the scientist with a possible explanation for her bewildering if amusing literary creations.

The Clue

The clue that led to this explanation seems to have been contributed by one B. F. Skinner. He unearthed the fact that Miss Stein many years ago made a study of automatic writing. She worked at Radcliffe College under the famous psychologist, Prof. Hugo Münsterberg, Mr. Skinner reported in the *Atlantic Monthly*. As a result of this work, Miss Stein and a colleague, Leon M. Solomons, wrote a paper under the title, "Normal Motor Automatism," which was published in the *Harvard Psychological Review* for September, 1896.

Miss Stein and her colleagues experimented on themselves, to see how far they, two normal people, could go in the path down which patients with disordered minds are forced by their affliction. Presumably they hoped in this way to learn more about the nature or cause or processes of disordered minds.

Put scientifically, they "attempted to investigate the limits of their own normal automatism, undertaking to see how far they could split their own personalities in a deliberate and purely artificial way."

To a certain extent they were successful, Mr. Skinner says. They got to the point where they could perform many acts, such as writing or talking aloud, in an automatic manner while carrying on some other activity at the same time.

Spontaneous automatic writing became easy after a little practice, Miss Stein reported. Did it become so easy that it became a habit, or that she came to prefer it to other more laborious ways

of writing? She herself denies that her present writing is automatic, but to the average reader, and apparently to the scientist, it seems more automatic than anything else. In her report she said of this kind of writing:

"A phrase would get into the head and keep repeating itself at every opportunity, and hang over from day to day even. The stuff written was grammatical, and the words and phrases fitted together, all right, but there was not much connected thought. The unconsciousness was broken into every six or seven words by flashes of consciousness, so that one cannot be sure but what the slight element of connected thought which occasionally appeared was due to these flashes of consciousness. But the ability to write stuff that sounds all right, without consciousness, was fairly well demonstrated by the experiments."

Useful Knowledge

With this report of her own experiments in mind, you might like to re-read some of her writings like the sample from "Wherein the South Differs from the North" which appears in her book, "Useful Knowledge" published by Payson and Clarke, Ltd.

Count count count.
How many countries can you have counted.
How many countries have you counted in this count.
How many countries have you counted.
North by north.
Counted.
Lost it up lost is as up, lost it up, happily lost it as up and lost it as up. You don't say so.
Lost it up. Lost is as up. And happily lost it as up. Lost is up.
Lost it as up.
That is done.
One run. Say so.
One run that is done say so.
Say so that is done one run that is done.
Not not hot.
Not not as what.
Not and not.
Not as hot.
Not as what.
Not.
North.

South.
Plenty of time.
North and south as we say plenty of time.
Not north for nothing.
Not for nothing.
Not north and not for nothing.
Not north and not for nothing. North not for nothing.
For nothing.
South for nothing.
Not South.
Not for the South and not for nothing.

"Obviously, therefore," comments the editor of the medical journal, "the writing of Miss Gertrude Stein, such as appears in her plays, books and poems, is quite the same as she developed when experimenting with spontaneous automatic writing."

"Mr. Skinner points out that the ordinary reader cannot infer from this writing that the author possesses any consistent point of view, because there is seldom, if any, intelligent expression of opinion.

"Her writing seems to be the result of a stream of consciousness of a woman without a past."

"Stream of consciousness" is the name for a style of writing adopted by a number of modern authors. A notable example is the "Ulysses" of James Joyce. You may have found this and the other books written in this style difficult to follow, but probably not as hard to read as Miss Stein's works.

Second Personality

"Mr. Skinner," continues the medical editor, "it convinced that this spontaneous automatic writing by Miss Stein is that of a second personality successfully split off from her conscious self, and unfortunately a personality without any background, intellectual opinions or emotions.

"The mere fact that Miss Stein herself occasionally appears in the midst of the writings of this second personality would seem to be the proof of the opinion."

So if you have been bewildered by Miss Stein's writings and have won-

dered how she got that way and why, here is an explanation on a scientific basis—an explanation derived from her own scientific investigations.

This article was edited from manuscript prepared by Science Service for use in illustrated newspaper magazines. Copyright, 1935, by EveryWeek Magazine and Science Service.

Science News Letter, March 2, 1935

PALEONTOLOGY

New Hampshire Was Under Sea in Devonian Epoch

CONCLUSIVE fossil evidence that an arm of the sea covered central New Hampshire for a period of from fifty to a hundred million years longer than geologists have previously believed, has been found by Prof. Marland P. Billings of Harvard University and Dr. Arthur B. Cleaves of Lafayette College, Pennsylvania.

Several hundred specimens of fifteen species of fossils positively identified as belonging to the lower Devonian epoch have been found by the two scientists in the vicinity of Littleton, northwest of the White Mountains and about ninety miles inland from the Atlantic coast. It had not been previously known that the sea in this period extended into New Hampshire, although its extension into other areas at that time had been ascertained.

Fossils of the Silurian period, believed to have begun about 400 million years ago and to have continued until the Devonian epoch, have previously been found in this area and told science that the sea was there at that time, but until the present discovery, no fossils satisfactorily identified as Devonian had been found in the region. Consequently the continuance of the sea in that area for fifty million additional years was unknown.

Science News Letter, March 2, 1935

NECK AND NECK

A snail race is here recorded by the camera of Miss Cornelia Clarke.

