

THREE LIVES *and* Q.E.D.

GERTRUDE STEIN



EDITED BY MARIANNE DEKOVEN

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Gertrude Stein
THREE LIVES *and* Q.E.D.



AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by
MARIANNE DEKOVEN
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

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Preface

Gertrude Stein was one of the most prolific, important, and influential writers of the twentieth century. She published twenty-five books, approximately half of her body of work, during her lifetime; the other half was published after her death in 1946. She was at the center of several overlapping Parisian modernist and avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century. Although she was not publically known as a lesbian—the social censure and opprobrium attached to homosexuality of that era made that impossible—she and her lifelong partner, Alice B. Toklas, were part of the loose network of lesbian writers and artists who lived on the Left Bank of Paris, in the free, tolerant avant-garde culture to which expatriate Americans fled, escaping both racial and sexual bigotry at home.

Gertrude and her older brother Leo Stein, with whom she expatriated to Paris in 1903, were among the earliest collectors of then-unknown painters such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and many others central to modernist art. Stein's collection of modernist painting, crowding the walls of her studio (where she wrote, long-hand in French children's school notebooks, all night, often until dawn) at her Paris home, 27 rue de Fleurus, was an internationally-known mecca for those who wanted to see modernist painting. In the first decades of the century, modern art was not yet available either in museums or in reproduction; Stein's salon was one of the few places where a significant collection could be seen. News of Stein's collection traveled by word of mouth; people came from all over the world to see it at specific viewing times established by Stein. She and Picasso were at the center of the bohemian Paris she describes in vivid, humorous detail in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (published in 1932). This book gave her the broader readership and reputation as a distinguished writer for which she had been longing since she began her career in 1903.

Stein was also at the center of the post–World War I scene of young American expatriate modernists, most notably Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and Thornton Wilder, all of whom acknowledged her influence and importance. Hemingway credited Stein with the epigraph to his 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*; “You are all a lost generation” subsequently became

one of the best-known characterizations of the era. (Several of Stein's sayings, in addition to "lost generation," have become staples of our culture—most notably, "there is no there there," which she said of her childhood home, Oakland, California, in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937); and from "Sacred Emily" (1913), "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," which is usually quoted as "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.")

Nonetheless, despite her visibility, centrality, and enormous productivity, Stein remained an obscure writer, known more for her interesting life, her art collection, and her connections to other writers and artists than for her own work until various critical movements of the last decades of the twentieth century inspired a new, productive interest in her writing. The renaissance of the avant-gardes in the 1960s kindled an interest in Stein among both writers and critics. The structuralist, poststructuralist, and feminist movements in criticism and literary theory of the 1970s and 1980s inspired a flowering interest in Gertrude Stein, bringing to critical attention many of her most experimental, least conventionally accessible works. These include great works such as *Tender Buttons* (1914), *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928), and *The Geographical History of America* (1935), and more obscure works such as the highly experimental, politically/sexually significant long poems "Patriarchal Poetry" (1953) and "Lifting Belly" (unpublished until 1989)—works that had previously been almost entirely ignored. Starting in the late 1980s, and continuing until the present, critical discourses focusing on race, ethnicity and religion, gender and sexuality, and nation and location have produced a substantial body of work on Stein, particularly on *Three Lives* (1909). The chronological ordering of the excerpts and essays in the Criticism section intends both to reveal the historical progression of critical preoccupations, from biography and form, to gender and sexuality, to race, ethnicity, religion and class, and to give a sense of the ongoing dialogue within Stein criticism that addresses all these issues with varying emphasis.

Three Lives was Stein's first experimental work. Its three stories were not published in the order in which they were written: "The Good Anna" was written first, but "Melanctha" was actually written last, after "The Gentle Lena." Stein's departure from literary convention increases as she writes these three tales. "The Good Anna" is the most conventionally written; "Melanctha" is the most experimental, with its extended repetitions, its mysteriously emblematic, reduced vocabulary, and its intense focus on consciousness at the expense of plot. Much of the criticism included in this volume addresses the issues raised by Stein's style in *Three Lives*, particularly in "Melanctha."

"Melanctha" was an adaptation of an earlier novel, *Q.E.D.*

(1903; published in 1950 as *Things As They Are*), also included in this volume. Because of its overt, realistic, autobiographical lesbian content, *Q.E.D.* was not published until four years after Stein's death. Stein had in fact concealed the existence of *Q.E.D.*, presumably not wanting Alice B. Toklas to read it because it narrates Stein's earlier lesbian affair. Jefferson Campbell in "Melanctha" is a transformation of the character Adele, the stand-in for Gertrude Stein in *Q.E.D.*—many of his thoughts and significant portions of his dialogue are adapted directly from Adele's, and are quite recognizable. Adele, based closely on Stein's background and experiences—she is an upper-middle-class, Jewish lesbian and former medical student—becomes Jefferson Campbell, a middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, black doctor whose practice is among working-class black people. The character of Melanctha is based on May Bookstaver, the woman with whom Stein had a difficult and failed affair in Baltimore, where Stein attended the Johns Hopkins Medical School before moving to Paris. (Bookstaver was more committed to another woman, Mabel Haynes, who is Mabel Neathe in *Q.E.D.*, than to Stein. *Q.E.D.* narrates this triangle, its title an ironic reference to the closure of a geometric proof.)

The transformation of the upper-middle-class, white, lesbian women of *Q.E.D.*—women of Stein's own social-sexual milieu—into working-class and middle-class black (overtly) heterosexual characters in "Melanctha" is the subject of much of the criticism included in this volume. The other two stories of *Three Lives* focus on German Catholic, immigrant, working-class women. Issues of class, ethnicity, and immigration to America, as well as of race, gender, sexuality, and religion, are raised with increasing emphasis in criticism of *Three Lives*. Much of this criticism attempts to connect these issues to the formal experimentation that, along with the painfully blatant racism of "Melanctha" (both used and undercut by Stein, as are the ethnic and class stereotypes of the other two stories), constitute the most challenging features of *Three Lives*. Both this formal difficulty and this racism have made, and continue to make, *Three Lives* controversial. In this volume, I have attempted to represent the broad range of critical responses to these controversies, in the belief that it is better to address directly the challenges these works present than to turn away from them.

Stein composed *Three Lives*, as she explains and as many critics discuss, after beginning a translation of Gustave Flaubert's story "*Un coeur simple*," or "A Simple Heart," one of his *Trois contes*, or *Three Tales*. "A Simple Heart" has a servant as its protagonist. "The Good Anna" is clearly indebted to this story, but goes well beyond it in its refusal of sentimentality and literariness, as the differences in title alone make clear: "a simple heart" conjures a broad spectrum of

moral sentiment, while the “good” in “The Good Anna” is highly ironic. The protagonist of “The Good Anna” is based on Lena Lebender, Stein’s servant in Baltimore, from whom “The Gentle Lena” gets her name. Miss Mathilda, Anna’s primary employer, is based on Stein herself. “Bridgepoint,” the setting of all three stories, is a fictionalized version of Baltimore. Stein lived in a racially mixed neighborhood of Baltimore, and she met black patients at the hospital where she worked as a medical student.

Stein also acknowledges the influence of Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso on *Three Lives*. She sat under a Cézanne portrait of his wife, and also sat for Picasso’s famous portrait of herself, a breakthrough work for Picasso into cubism—walking back and forth daily the long distance between the rue de Fleurus and Picasso’s Montmartre studio—while she wrote these stories. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein says that the ordinary Parisian lives she observed during these walks also influenced her writing of *Three Lives*. Portraits—inner consciousness in relation to the outer manifestations of individual lives—were central to Stein’s work throughout her career. The radically new forms Cézanne and Picasso invented in painting also parallel the radically new forms Stein invented in writing, as many critics included in this volume discuss.

Stein attended the Johns Hopkins Medical School because she had been encouraged to do so by her teacher and mentor at Harvard, William James. He thought she would follow him and become a psychologist; in order to do that, as the profession was constituted at that time, she needed a medical education. She had been one of James’s star pupils and she did brilliantly (though unevenly) at Hopkins as well, until, for various reasons, including the hostility toward women of several of the faculty members, her depression over the failure of her affair with May Bookstaver, and the waning of her own interest in the field, she dropped out of Hopkins only one course credit short of a medical degree. William James’s influence on Stein, especially in his theories of time and consciousness, was crucial, and is apparent in *Three Lives*, as several critics included herein discuss.

Stein could not find a publisher for *Three Lives*, as she explains humorously in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. She finally published it at her own expense with the Grafton Press in 1909. This press, unaware that Stein was American, and making assumptions based on her Parisian residence, sent a representative to Stein’s home to ask whether she might need some help with her English. Since that time, *Three Lives* has become one of the most important works of literary modernism in any language.

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The Texts of
THREE LIVES and *Q.E.D.*



A Note on the Texts

The text of *Three Lives* is the 1909 Grafton Press edition.
The text of *Q.E.D.* is the 1973 Liveright edition.

THREE LIVES¹



STORIES OF THE GOOD ANNA,
MELANCETHA AND THE GENTLE LENA

1. Title is derived from Gustave Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877), or *Three Stories*, translated into English as *Three Tales*, the first story of which, "*Un Coeur simple*" ("A Simple Heart"), Stein was translating when she began writing "The Good Anna."

*Donc je suis un malheureux et ce
n'est ni ma faute ni celle de la vie.*

JULES LAFORGUE²

2. "So I am an unhappy person and this is neither my fault nor life's." This "quotation" from French Symbolist poet Jules Laforgue (1860–1887) may have been invented by Stein—it has not been found anywhere in Laforgue's work (see Carl Wood, "Continuity of Romantic Irony," in "Criticism," page 302).

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The Good Anna

Part I

THE tradesmen of Bridgepoint³ learned to dread the sound of “Miss Mathilda”, for with that name the good Anna always conquered.⁴

The strictest of the one price stores⁵ found that they could give things for a little less, when the good Anna had fully said that “Miss Mathilda” could not pay so much and that she could buy it cheaper “by Lindheims.”

Lindheims was Anna’s favorite store, for there they had bargain days, when flour and sugar were sold for a quarter of a cent less for a pound, and there the heads of the departments were all her friends and always managed to give her the bargain prices, even on other days.

Anna led an arduous and troubled life.

Anna managed the whole little house for Miss Mathilda. It was a funny little house, one of a whole row of all the same kind that made a close pile like a row of dominoes that a child knocks over, for they were built along a street which at this point came down a steep hill. They were funny little houses, two stories high, with red brick fronts and long white steps.⁶

This one little house was always very full with Miss Mathilda, an under servant, stray dogs and cats and Anna’s voice that scolded, managed, grumbled all day long.

“Sallie! can’t I leave you alone a minute but you must run to the door to see the butcher boy come down the street and there is Miss Mathilda calling for her shoes. Can I do everything while you go around always thinking about nothing at all? If I ain’t after you every minute you would be forgetting all the time, and I take all this pains, and when you come to me you was as ragged as a buzzard and as dirty as a dog. Go and find Miss Mathilda her shoes where you put them this morning.”

3. “Bridgepoint” is based on Baltimore, Maryland, where Stein lived when she was a student at the Johns Hopkins Medical School from 1897 to 1901.

4. The character of Anna Federner is based on Stein’s servant in Baltimore, Lena Lebender; Miss Mathilda is based on Stein herself.

5. Stores at which prices were fixed rather than subject to bargaining or haggling.

6. Based on Stein’s house in Baltimore.