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THREE LIVES

GERTRUDE STEIN

Includes an introduction and critical commentary

E N R I C H E D C L A S S I C

Three Lives



GERTRUDE STEIN

Introduction by
BRENDA WINEAPPLE

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INTRODUCTION

THREE LIVES



You've written a strange little book, the head of the Grafton Press told Gertrude Stein, and most people won't take it very seriously. Frederick Hitchcock was referring to *Three Lives*. He suggested Stein write a preface—better yet, let someone else write it—to explain what the stories in *Three Lives* were about. Stein refused. And yet she never shrank from talking about her work, sometimes in terms that shocked readers as much as the work itself did. *Three Lives*, she proclaimed grandly, “was the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth in literature.”

The grand manner came later, after derision and neglect, the price she paid for venturing where others feared to tread. “I write for myself and strangers,” Stein had acknowledged years earlier, hoping that she would find an audience, which she did. For in *Three Lives*, she had created something that people would take seriously—no matter what the head of Grafton Press had said. Published in 1909 in a blue-and-gold wrapper, the book brought her a certain notoriety among the cognoscenti as a writer with a unique style, and today it's regarded, as Stein had predicted, as the hallmark of a new and modern century. Stein refreshes our interest in language, claimed poet William Carlos Williams. Novelist Sherwood Anderson agreed. “The work of Gertrude Stein,”

he says, "consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words."

When she finished *Three Lives* in 1906, Gertrude Stein knew she had produced an extraordinary book. "It will certainly make your hair curl with the complications and tintinabulations of its style," Stein wrote a friend. "I think it a noble combination of Swift and Matisse." That she always referred to painters—particularly Cézanne and Matisse—when speaking of *Three Lives* was no accident. In 1904, she and her brother Leo purchased the portrait *Madame Cézanne with a Fan*, a striking picture of Cézanne's wife seated in a red armchair, and it was under this painting that Stein wrote *Three Lives*, influenced by its method. "Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing," Stein told a friend. "Each part is as important as the whole and that impressed me so much that I began to write *Three Lives* under this influence and this idea of composition."

The subject of Stein's three stories is two immigrant Germans and one mulatto woman, and at first glance, the plots of all three tales seem quite straightforward. "The Good Anna" portrays the "arduous and troubled life" of Anna Federner, who's been employed as a domestic servant since she turned seventeen; "Melanctha: Each One As She May" recounts the life of the "complex, desiring" Melanctha Herbert and her romance with an African American doctor, Jefferson Campbell; and in "The Gentle Lena," originally called "The Story of a Gentle Soul," Stein takes Lena Mainz from Germany to America, where she lives, works, marries, and dies. But these reductive summaries ignore the unique form of the stories, for much the way a painter creates a portrait on a canvas, Stein in *Three Lives* incrementally builds character not from plot but from the slow accretion of word upon word, phrase upon phrase, combining and adding so as to express a total human being. "I was not interested in mak-

ing the people real," Stein later said, "but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value."

Repeating the phrase "good" in "The Good Anna," for instance, Stein conjugates the ways in which Anna is virtuous, reliable, conventional, and kind. Similarly, in "The Gentle Lena," Stein creates Lena's character from a series of echoing phrases and iterated rhythms, dramatizing the awkward, poignant sensibility of one whose inner life consists mostly of the occasional "gentle stir within her." "Lena did not really know she did not like it," Stein writes, "Lena did not really know what it was that had happened to her," "She did not know." Not knowing is the quality most associated with Lena, whose gentleness becomes more demonstrative—more impenetrable, passive, patient, and abused—than we may have thought.

Written last, "Melanctha" is the most boldly experimental story in *Three Lives*. Here, Stein moves beyond the declarative pronouncements of "The Good Anna" and the indirect discourse of "The Gentle Lena" to a lyrical, repetitive series of monologues in which the experience of love and distance is a function of pacing, cadence, and connective—two individuals linked or separated through a series of parallel phrases, their nonverbal perception of one another a matter of participles:

Every day now, they seemed to be having more and more, both together, of this strong, right feeling. More and more every day now they seemed to know more really, what it was each other one was always feeling. More and more now every day Jeff found in himself, he felt more trusting. More and more every day now, he did not think anything in words about what he was always doing. Every day now more and more Melanctha would let out to Jeff her real strong feeling.

One day there had been much joy between them, more than they ever yet had had with their new feel-

ing. All the day they had lost themselves in warm wandering. Now they were lying there and resting, with a green, bright, light-flecked world around them.

Feeling, trusting, doing, resting, and "warm wandering": Stein creates the passion of lovemaking without resorting to techniques of documentary realism. Rather, she develops an elastic, melodious language in which consciousness comes slowly, very slowly, to an awareness of itself: "Jeff did not know now any more, what to feel within him," Stein writes when Jefferson Campbell begins to doubt himself and Melanctha. "He did not know how to begin thinking out this trouble that must always now be bad inside him. He just felt a confused struggle and resentment always in him, a knowing, no, Melanctha was not right in what she had said that night to him, and then a feeling, perhaps he always had been wrong in the way he never could be understanding."

Eloquent in a vernacular of plain speech, the characters in *Three Lives* are recognizable, human, affecting. Each of them struggles—even Lena—with circumstances beyond their control. All of them, especially the women, inhabit a world of limited opportunity, and all three women protagonists die prematurely, one after an operation, one from tuberculosis, one in childbirth. "So, I am unhappy and it is neither my fault nor that of my life," Stein introduces her stories with a quotation from Jules Laforgue, suggesting that her characters float along impersonal tides of social class, race, sexuality, gender, illness, and plain bad luck. But Stein's prose swims against the current, and by depicting each woman in a sober, often ironic, and frequently flat manner, paradoxically she grants all of them uniqueness and their own special voices.

Stein came to writing *Three Lives* by a circuitous route. Born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, on February 3, 1874, the

fifth and youngest child of German-Jewish parents, she was raised in Oakland, California, although she had been taken to Vienna and Paris as a child. By and large, however, hers was a solid bourgeois household, "old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old," as she wrote in her family saga, *The Making of Americans* (1925). But her mother and then her father died in quick succession, leaving Stein an orphan in the care of elder siblings. When one of them, her brother Leo, left California to attend Harvard University, Stein lived briefly in Baltimore, Maryland, with relatives. Then she followed suit, enrolling at the Harvard Annex (later Radcliffe College) in 1893.

Stein's education truly began during her sophomore year. Studying psychology, she undertook a series of experiments into the existence of the second self—what we might today call the unconscious mind—at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory under the aegis of Hugo Münsterberg and William James, and she even published some of her results in the *Harvard Psychology Review*. Decades later, the behaviorist B. F. Skinner discovered her paper on automatic writing, which he mistakenly claimed to be responsible for Stein's unusual style. She denied it. Writing was a conscious and deliberate act, and she knew what she wanted to do.

In 1897, she wanted to know more about character, especially the character of women. When James reportedly told Stein that to pursue her interest she'd need a medical degree, she returned to Baltimore. She enrolled in the Johns Hopkins University Medical School, recently opened with the support of local feminists, who stipulated that it admit women on an equal (not equivalent) basis with men. But though Stein planned to specialize in the nervous diseases of women after graduation, in the eleventh hour she failed to get her degree, and though she could have received it soon afterward, her attention flagged. As she explained years later in her book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "she was

so bored she could not remember the things that of course the dullest medical student could not forget."

That was in 1901. Two years later, Stein landed in Paris, pencils sharpened. Medicine was a thing of the past, but not the study of women or of character. She had decided that, above all else, she wanted to write. And she had already begun. She started a long saga based on her family and during a brief residence in New York worked on two short novels, "Fernhurst" and "Q. E. D." The former was based on the torrid love affair between a married man, Alfred Hodder—another student of William James—and Mamie Gwinn, a Bryn Mawr teacher romantically involved with M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr's president. Obviously, the subject matter was scandalous, as was the topic of "Q. E. D.," a fictional account of Stein's own romantic entanglement with two women, published posthumously in 1950 as *Things As They Are*.

More conducive than America to romances with women or to writing and a modest income, France became Stein's residence until her death in 1946. ("America is my country but Paris is my home town," Stein later remarked.) Preceded there by her brother Leo, an art lover who wanted to try his hand at painting, Stein moved into his atelier at 23 rue de Fleurus on Paris's Left Bank, and soon they were accumulating furniture and books and friends, all the accoutrements of a settled life. And they bought paintings, lots of them, with the earnings from their parents' estate that their older brother Michael invested wisely. "I was a Columbus setting sail," Leo Stein would recall in a memoir, "for the world beyond the world." Leo looked into Ambroise Vollard's gallery at the suggestion of the art connoisseur Bernard Berenson and shortly afterward purchased a small Cézanne, laying the cornerstone of the Steins' extraordinary collection.

Before very long, the Stein studio hung floor to ceiling with stunning canvases by Cézanne, Manguin, Bonnard,

Lautrec, Gauguin, Vuillard, Renoir, Degas, Matisse (to name a few) as well as the paintings of the young, indigent Pablo Picasso. On Saturday nights, the Steins hospitably opened their doors, welcoming friends and artists and art lovers, there being simply no other place where one could see and discuss modern art. For many, the entire experience sparked an aesthetic awakening the likes of which they never encountered before or since.

For a short while, Leo Stein occupied center stage at the rue de Fleurus. He loved to talk and, in particular, to explain the astonishing work that hung on the atelier's walls. For him, like his sister, the collection—indeed, modern art—began with Cézanne. As he would later recall, “the effect of Cézanne’s work was to emphasize a return to more formal composition, to open up the field of compositional experimentation in fresh ways, to break up a few academic conventions, and to make people ready to accept as possibly good, and even probably good, anything they could not understand and appreciate.” Actually, the same may be said for Gertrude Stein’s experimental *Three Lives*, which also shattered conventions, forcing readers to reconsider what nouns and verbs and adverbs and conjunctions can do as if they were dabs of paint, each indispensable to the constructed whole.

Stein’s sense of composition also derives from the enthusiasm for Japanese art sweeping through Boston while Stein had been at Radcliffe. What’s more, in 1895, her brother had visited Japan, returning home with a cache of prints. From this collection, Stein could study how subjects taken from everyday life are rendered through color, line, and mass variously arranged or carefully repeated. Simple and abstract, the technique obviously influenced Stein; her early notebooks contain an inventory of Japanese artists.

The literary sources for *Three Lives* include Flaubert’s *Trois Contes*, which Stein had been translating. (In tribute

to "Un Coeur Simple," where the servant Félicité confuses a parrot for the Holy Ghost, Stein supplies the good Anna with a green bird.) Flaubert's dispassionate and succinct style trimmed the fat from Victorian prose, which Stein would also do. Not surprisingly, some of the stimulus for *Three Lives* also came, it seems, from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, a book Stein long considered a masterpiece for the way Boswell liberated Johnson from the mechanics of plot. Boswell's Johnson is rendered fully in discrete vignettes, as are the sundry individuals Johnson encounters. Struck by Samuel Johnson's account of Bet Flint, Stein entered it into her notebooks: "habitually a slut and a drunkard and occasionally a thief and a harlot."

Of contemporary writers, Henry James was Stein's bellwether, a crack literary theorist as well as subtle writer of chilling depth. Copying out long portions of *The Wings of the Dove* novel into her notebooks when she wrote "Q. E. D.," Stein scrutinized the conscientiously composed blocks of material, as James called the several points of view in his book. "Melanctha" is "Q. E. D." rewritten, and throughout, one detects James in Stein's own composed blocks of material, those long meditative passages of interior monologue where characters confront or avoid or endure the divisions between knowing and feeling—truly a Jamesian dilemma in a prose that takes the master beyond himself. After the publication of *Three Lives*, she presumably tried to meet with James, who pleaded illness. Thirty years later, she included him as one of her *Four in America*, imagining what he would be like if he had been a general.

Thematically, Stein's three stories share James's interest in knowledge, self-deception, and the myriad forms of betrayal. In "Melanctha," Melanctha seeks wisdom—"a strange experience of ignorance and power and desire"—but knows not what she seeks, and though she believes she yearns for "rest and quiet, and always she could only find

new ways to be in trouble." Moreover, for Stein, as for James, the relationship of lovers and friends is a seesaw of shifting power. "In friendship," Stein writes in "The Good Anna," "power always has its downward curve. One's strength to manage rises always higher until there comes a time one does not win, and though one may not really lose, still from the time that victory is not sure, one's power slowly ceases to be strong. It is only in a close tie such as marriage that influence can mount and grow always stronger with the years and never meet with a decline. It can only happen so when there is no way to escape." Always and inevitably varying, power is as dynamic as people—and friendships are as fragile.

An anacometist of the human byplay, Stein elaborates how one character impinges upon another, dominates another, needs another. Lena responds passively to a variety of galling situations: Mrs. Haydon, Lena's anxious and self-regarding aunt, brings Lena to America and wants to marry her off respectably, which she does; Lena's indifferent husband tries to protect her from a difficult mother-in-law, whose constant scolding pounds Lena's gentleness into spiritual torpor. Sinking deeper and deeper into indifference after the birth of each of her three children, Lena delivers a stillborn child, and shortly afterward she too dies, a cipher for whom we all feel responsible, like Melville's *Bartleby*.

Like Lena, the good Anna inhabits a small, striated world—only in this case, merrily satirized by Anna's attempt to preserve in her pets "the dignity becoming in a dog." All three stories in Stein's volume take place in a fictionalized Baltimore called Bridgepoint, a socially and racially riven society, and Anna is modeled on Stein's German housekeeper, Lena Lebender. Stein herself appears in "The Good Anna" as Anna's preferred employer, Miss Mathilda, a "large, cheerful, but faint hearted woman," somewhat careless, well-traveled, and fully capable of coming home "with a bit

of porcelain, a new etching, and sometimes even an oil painting on her arm"—much to Anna's thrifty horror. But it is Mrs. Lehtman, a midwife, and not Miss Mathilda, who is "the romance in Anna's life"—until, that is, the relationship imperceptibly and irrevocably changes, as relationships do.

This is the subject of the intricate "Melanctha," the ill-starred romance of "Q. E. D.," written during the period when Stein sat for Picasso's portrait. "And the poignant incidents that she [Stein] wove into the life of Melanctha were often these she noticed in walking down the hill from the rue Ravignan," she claimed. Perhaps so; but if the stories in *Three Lives* depend on events and people from Stein's life, she invents her world far more intensely than she observes it. Nowhere is this more true than in "Melanctha," where Stein develops the signature repetitions of her prose.

For Stein, repetition helps render the essence of character. As she later explained, "I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again," she later commented, "until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different."

The aesthetic discoveries of "Melanctha"—that "if you listened with great intensity you can hear it rise and fall"—enable Stein to move away from a conventional plot-driven narrative to the taxonomy of character crucial to her next project, *The Making of Americans*, and integral to her belief in what she called the "bottom nature" of everyone. Unfortunately, this typological vision implies a hierarchy, which, in the case of "Melanctha," seems decidedly racist. And is.

"Melanctha" is a compendium of racial stereotypes. Razor-slashing black men and promiscuous black women

strut through the story, players on a bone-chilling stage. And not only does the "subtle intelligent, attractive, half-white girl" Melanctha differ from Rose, who "was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes," Stein conceives of Melanctha herself as a stereotype: the tragic mulatto, part white and part black, impaled on a white person's idea of race. Her whiteness provides her with consciousness, her blackness with earthiness, and both conspire to exclude her from both the white world and from what Stein shallowly names "the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes" and a "good warm nigger time."

Yet, early champions of Stein leapfrogged the racism of "Melanctha," considering it a "thrilling clinical record" as the poet William Carlos Williams said, "of a colored woman in the present-day United States, told with directness and truth." Richard Wright, too, hailed "Melanctha" as the "first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States." Their approval demonstrates how deeply racism is embedded in American life and American literature, where, as novelist Toni Morrison notes, "there is no romance free of what Herman Melville called 'the power of blackness.'"

Stein accepted the prevailing racist orthodoxy of her time. Yet, if her depiction of her black characters is patronizing, she also exploits the power of blackness, with which she identifies. As a Jew, a woman, a westerner come to eastern citadels of culture, Stein readily sympathizes with the African American, an outsider like herself, and converts her identification into a source of expression both for herself and her subjects, however truckling they are portrayed. What's more, as a lesbian doubtless aware that the medical and scientific community in her day associated the black female's sexuality with that of a so-called deviant, she in turn indicts the bourgeois sensibility—her own as well as the culture's—that builds facile assumptions into the injunction of "just living regular."

Like Melanctha, Stein cannot and will not inhabit the regulated world of Dr. Jefferson Campbell. "Dr. Campbell said he wanted to work so that he could understand what troubled people," Stein writes, "and not to just have excitements, and he believed you ought to love your father and your mother and to be regular in all your life, and not to be always wanting new things and excitements, and to always know where you were and what you wanted, and to always tell everything just as you meant it." Moreover, his wish to tell "everything just as you meant it" fails in the face of real feeling, deep feeling, and strong, scorching love. As Melanctha says, "You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling." What is necessary—what Melanctha cannot do but Stein can—is construct an alternate form of telling, a different language.

Perhaps that is why Stein so plangently evokes the incompatible responses to experience—and words—represented by Jefferson Campbell and the complex, desiring, melancholy Melanctha. The sundered whole creates the tension and the tragedy in this small, gemlike tale.

After Gertrude Stein sent William James a copy of *Three Lives*, James declared Stein had created a new kind of realism. She also mailed her book to H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, though only Wells responded. In 1913, no longer outraged by Stein's style, Wells said he actually liked it.

At Stein's expense, the Grafton Press had printed one thousand copies, five hundred of which were bound. The reviews, though few in number, were favorable. But the book did not sell. Regardless, in the next few years, Gertrude Stein became a legend in her own time. Associated with the Post-Impressionists in 1913 at the Armory Show in New York when Mabel Dodge circulated Stein's work, in 1914

Stein published the jarring and eloquent *Tender Buttons*, which incited both catcalls and acclaim, and by the 1920s she was the doyenne of a new generation of readers.

"They do quote me," Stein remarked. "That means that my words and my sentences get under their skins, although they do not know it." Scoffers might dub her the "Mother Goose of Montparnasse," but American expatriates launching their careers in Paris paid their respects at 27 rue de Fleurus, where Stein now lived with her lifelong partner, Alice B. Toklas. She commanded the respect of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mina Loy, Glenway Wescott, Sherwood Anderson, Marianne Moore; the list goes on and on and includes Ernest Hemingway, whose prose style and early career owe a direct debt to Gertrude Stein.

Until her death in 1946, Stein wrote plays and operas and children's stories; she wrote memoirs and autobiographies and the bestseller *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1934), a tour de force of ventriloquism, with Stein speaking as Toklas. She wrote portraits and landscapes and lectures. She never stopped writing, experimenting, challenging, undoing, or revising the vocabulary she had helped to cleanse. Who hasn't heard that "rose is a rose is a rose"? Who hasn't considered its meaning? And once we do, we have embarked on an adventure, the adventure of language, and in *Three Lives*, we meet early Stein—vintage Stein—who conducts us along the wonderful way.

Brenda Wineapple

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