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Why do we publish so much Gertrude Stein?

by Dick Higgins

The assumption about Gertrude Stein is that she's historically important, somehow, but also somehow beside the point. Her style is said to be her message, and elaborate theories of process are made up about this. They say that apart from her style, her work reads like "My Day," Eleanor Roosevelt's old newspaper column. They say its vacuous, that no individual work stands out. Its interest is to the chroniclers who make lists of innovations, and her great achievement is "literary cubism." Socially she was a sybarite keeping a salon for the gilded expatriates from the USA who sparkled around France in the 1920's and 1930's, a great personality but not quite a serious writer, a curiosity who applied Jamesian psychology and Bergsonian philosophy to her own weird literary epistemology, perhaps she was a crazy feminist but certainly she had a charlatan element in her—that's what "they" say, the standardists and going thing people, who praise her with their lips while attacking her with their guts. Now I happen to be somewhere else: I see her as the only important writer between Alexander Pope and Bertolt Brecht, and I'd like to point out a few viewing points along the way to my opinion.

How much truth is there in the "going thing" attitude? Some. But to understand her is to love her—she doesn't treat us like butlers but as sentient people. She expects us to put our own heads in order through her work. Her works are organizing impetuses, psychological probes. She stimulates. Like a scientist. It took her a long time to learn her technique—it wasn't done overnight. Her subjects are taken from everyday life, just as Mrs. Roosevelt's were. And like Mrs. Roosevelt, she knew many of the very biggest wigs of her day—and wrote about them, but there's a big difference here. Stein abhorred journalism—called it warmed-over death. To her, famous people were landmarks on a landscape, and landscape was "interesting"—i.e., one of the things that could deeply involve a person. Therefore the reference to famous people—and to people who couldn't possibly be remembered also, but who were part of her landscape. And of course she found great issues in small things, like Thoreau. The work is only vacuous if you're looking for Wagnerian climaxes and grandiose sequences. Even these are there, if you look deftly enough—but one must recognize climaxes of joy and exuberance, rather than baroque

death-wishes. Sure, she had a great influence on Hemingway, but after all who in the world reads Hemingway anymore? Today we see him as a talented writer whose first two novels were masterpieces, and after that, it's just the idle macho thumping of a very long kettledrum solo. As for her politics, the fascists thought she was a crazy (therefore harmless) kind of communist, a Trotskyite maybe, and gave her the collected works of Marshall Pétain to translate into English, while the communists, unduly impressed by the large circulation of the *Saturday Evening Post*, took her "About Money"/"More About Money"/and "Still More About Money" inclusions very literally, matched them with the sybarite image, and came up with the fascistic Ms. Stein. These articles are tongue-in-cheek epigrams like the Scott Fitzgerald/Hemingway exchanges.

But of course, most communists see innovative artists as fascists, and virtually all fascists see innovative artists as communists. Their real political and social and overall positions are usually ignored. Yes, Stein studied with William James. She also studied for one summer at least with a negro midwife, delivering babies in Baltimore. This medical experience,

shared with such notorious conservatives as Che Guevara and Saint Luke, profoundly affects such books as *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein*, where the opening section of "A Long Gay Book" (the first of the three stories) deals in a very deep way with how it feels to enter into life as a child, to be a woman and not to have a child. It's a book that Donald Sutherland's criticism of it typifies—"an early book of considerable interest though of incoherent form, as it makes the transition between the style of *The Making of Americans* and that of *Tender Buttons*." He, probably the best Stein critic, sees it as mere style. In 1972 and hereabouts, over our new decades, we see it as what she said it was, a long book, ambiguously gay and about being gay. Not incoherent at all. It also is the book she referred to in an interview, in combination with talking about her "Melanctha" from *Three Lives*, when she was praising Richard Wright's great black militant works as the main ones and relating them to her own, outsider's works . . . It is not on record that Wright minded this at all. No, she wasn't overwhelmed with daily politics—she avoided it: "journalism." She needed privacy: on my wall there hangs a letter from her to an editor or writer: "My dear Glass, I am sorry not to see you but I am already in the country. You must not take Europe too seriously, it is a comfortable place to be alone and that is for many purposes a necessity. Good luck to you always. Gertrude Stein." If she had been involved politically on a daily basis, she would have lost this privacy, many of the great works would not have been written, she would have been miserable, and the world would have gained a rather ordinary journalist at the expense of a very great writer and a fine philosopher.

A lot of the work is simply not available. This is partly due to the Stein estate, which wants unrealistic amounts to make this or that edition "official" even when they don't control the rights. And some of it is due to the preciousness of the Stein coterie which would rather collect than read her (contrary to one of her best-known remarks). It's really impossible to go beyond Boynton without knowing where Boynton is: and so it is with Stein. I would like to see all Stein works available so we can take the next steps: maybe by publishing the works that the Stein estate doesn't control, we can provoke others into

doing more, and maybe somebody into doing a Stein *Collected Works* (in which case we'd bow out of the picture). But much of what we publish is in the Stein spirit, and it seems also Steinian to use the best work of the past to support the present, by using Stein's public domain books to support our publication of newer masters like Spoorri, Porter, MacLennan and Mac Low: these reflect back onto her work too.

Just to poke into the Stein books we've already done, let's see what's there, not in depth (that'd take a pretty big book) but in probe. There are four to start with: *The Making of Americans*, *Geographies and Plays*, *Lucy Church Amiably* and *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein*. Sure, we'll do more. As long as nobody else will and the people need it. But that's a good set to start with. It's also the nave of that female gothic cathedral that came to call on our time.

The Making is a "great novel," which, ostensibly, nobody can read, it was patronized and legendized, quoted and referred to a lot, abridged and issued in ¼ length (with about ¼ quality, though Stein was consulted about the abridgement), was crucified, dead and buried. On the third day—three decades later—it rose again in our unabridged edition and then in Harcourt Brace's shorter one, which most certainly didn't ascend into heaven, in spite of its charming passage about butterflies (irrelevant to the rest of the text), spied out by Bernard Fay in an early draft and edited into the wee version. The small version seems to be mostly about language and about the Hersland family. The large version is about thought, attacking the concept of national "experience" and differences, not by saying they don't exist but that by stroking and caressing the ideas can verge. Thinking becomes exciting as this process expands the reader's feelings about these cumulative details, as he or she duplicates the experience in his or her mind.

Geographies and Plays comes from the 'teens and early 'twenties while the "complete" version of *The Making of Americans* comes from 1909-1912. Actually, *The Making* will probably never be done "complete," since it exists in four different versions (at the Yale Library), dating from 1904 to about 1916, quite different, and totalling thousands upon thousands of manuscript pages (Stein wrote fast). But Stein was

constantly working, thinking, planning the entire cosmology of the arts. She had a fragmented, grandiose concept of theater—a sort of instant theater, pageantlike but non-narrative, like the more imagistic and disciplined sort of happenings. These were her plays. Spoken arias to be orchestrated among sets of imagistic characters. No symbols, climaxes, or authenticated archaisms. Plenty of costumes—and please, proscenium arches. Lots of arches, even, maybe. But an isolation of events, to be treated musically, and scored among the available voices. On Broadway *Four Saints in Three Acts* became a hit. Off-Broadway, likewise with *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* and *A Curtain Raiser*. People can feel this work, even in the version in which it has become best known, though they don't know why. Actually, such vintage "plays" as are in *Geographies and Plays* have never been done in a Steinian way, so far as I know. If you want to know the meaning of a word in Stein, look it up. Then mix up the various definitions and take any one at random—or look for a common denominator. Her plays are games, kid stuff, traditional theater, and goodness knows what else. Milking them for impact works with only a few (*Four Saints* and *Daniel Webster*)—the last not currently available, it's in an old *New Directions* annual). The way to do them would be choreographically, not dramatically. Joy: no climaxes. And no production numbers. Just pure—coaxing, stroking.

The *Geographies* are stories that describe situations, environments: inventories of available events. They do not have anything to do, necessarily, with national things or geopolitics or topography. You can have a geography of the mind, and do: probably the finest of Gertrude Stein's philosophical writings is *The Geographical History of America*, currently unavailable in any edition other than a very expensive printout from University Microfilms. This last is a sustained inquiry in which she wonders who she is and how she went to market (in the nursery rhyme) her eggs for to sell, who fell asleep on the king's highway (so much for manly power), thieves came by and cut her petticoats away, and when she came by, back home, her doggie barked at her, and she knew "this couldn't be I, because my little dog didn't know me." The

geographies in *Geographies and Plays* are like very fine prose poems that lead up to the *Geographical History*, quite interesting in their own right, but not so profound. "I know that I am I because my little dog knows me" is one heck of a lucid answer to Descartes, with his emphasis on himself: the earlier geographies are bridges between the "descriptions" from the more experimental 'teens works (e.g., *Tender Buttons*, or the texts following the title text in *As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story*).

Gertrude Stein didn't loathe blood and gore. Not by a long shot. She even revelled in it in her one mystery novel, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, which is filled with lots of mystery, suspicion and gooey mess, without any need whatever for suspense or explanation—a perfect refresher when you get tired of Rex Stout and Agatha Christie. But each of her novels is unique and fills a unique need. *Ida* is about identity, and does in fiction (art) what the *Geographical History* does in philosophy or psychology. The *Geographical History* ends: "When he is young a dog has more identity than when he is older. / I am sure that this is not the end." (So much for men.) *Ida* ends ". . . They are there. Thank them. / Yes." And you don't know who they are. *Mrs. Reynolds*, which Gertrude Stein wrote during World War II, and which is probably her greatest novel (formerly published by Yale University Press but momentarily o/p), is also about identity, is plotless, and deals with the slow movement of people and roles among themselves. It tells about Mrs. Reynolds (there is no Mr. Reynolds, really), Angel Harper (Adolph Hitler) who appears as a thunder cloud and goes away mysteriously—a procession passing by—and day by day, one relates to people as to the weather. But this particular sequence began in the almost unknown—even by Stein people—novel, *Lucy Church Amiably*, which Gertrude Stein called "A novel of rare and romantic beauty and which looks like an engraving." The whole work consists of minimally punctuated but commonplace sentences that cumulate lyrically into a very spacious and beautiful cloud. In the Gertrude Stein canon it holds about the same place as the Anna Lyvia Plurabelle

section of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, equally soft in tone and haunting, and written in the same year (1927). Nobody likes *Lucy Church Amiably*—it's too beautiful—if they have to read it to themselves. But try reading it aloud, with very clear breaks where Stein has put in sentence periods or paragraph breaks: the one is, per Gertrude Stein, emotional and the other logical or just plain sensible, but the reader can determine which. Read aloud it is one of Stein's strongest works—in fact it is the best one to read aloud of all of them. Think of it as listening to falling water: Gertrude Stein did.

Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein (1909): this is the unmentionable book in the Stein canon. For one thing, it's about homosexuality, and for another thing, it's written in her most difficult, "cubist" style. For both reasons it has baffled her (mostly male) critics.

A discreet title it has. But the title shows its sham immediately: each of the two "shorter stories"—and officially it's called *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein with Two Shorter Stories*—is longer than the title story. The first, *A Long Gay Book*, can pretty well speak for itself. It opens, as I've already said, with a powerful statement of how a very mature person, obviously loving children, feels on entering into a life in which her style and her sexuality will not be geared towards having babies. Many people know, from the *Autobiography* and elsewhere, that as a medical student she delivered a number of babies, that she wrote *A Long Gay Book* by watching couples and combinations and groups on the street and imagining about them. But until one has read the book, the fantasies sound abstract when one tries to describe them. The myth about *A Long Gay Book* is that it's uneven and unsustained. The fact is that it contains some of Stein's most fascinating writing and observation, and that only resistance to the subject matter has prevented people from seeing what a self-contained masterpiece it is. The opening pages, especially, are one of the mightiest texts in modern literature.

The second story in *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein*, "Many Many Women" is a sort of sequel to "A Long Gay Book." It is purely about days and

women. And identity, which is the touchstone of Stein's special cosmology. There are no men, other than by reference or implication, in the entire 80+ page novella. None of the personnel have names—they are simply and exclusively women. To see how positive her statement is, try the final two pages of the story. It's like brushing out your hair.

The third, "G.M.P.," is rather more bizarre. In it she tries to fantasize a love between Matisse and Picasso, including a very uncharacteristic (for Stein) string of symbols whenever she waits to avoid explicit sexual descriptions (as on page 264), and to draw a connection between this and the different kind of love that was shared between herself, Matisse and Picasso. No history, no recriminations: the love ended (she disliked Mrs. Matisse) and her politics weren't Picasso's. But love was there when that's what it was, and it's an unusual work in the Stein corpus, because of its symbols. The only other well-known one is *Four Saints in Three Acts*, with its Parsifal and holy-ghost imagery, references to passages in St. Theresa's autobiography and the writings of St. John of the Cross (who isn't even a character in *Four Saints*), all most unusual for a thoroughly and profoundly unconverted Jew like Gertrude Stein. As a work, however, "G.M.P." registers as comparatively awkward, but it provides the beard for the book. And that too has its place in Steinian humor. In *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein* we're spared the tiresome tea-party self-interrogations of the early novel, *Things As They Are (Q. E. D.)* (her other book with a purely initialled title besides *G. M. P.*—any connection?), and we don't get the full-fledged feminist eroticism of the later poem cycle, "Lifting Belly." But we do get frank exposition, a lot to say and a way to say it, joy and the view of things from inside things (as good cubism ought to be). Nobody would call this an easy book, but it's a heck of a human one and this is rare, and there's no excuse for not recognizing it as such. It needs reading more than talking about.

From my farm
June 26, 1972

These are the **Gertrude Stein** books available from the Something Else Press (order them through your favorite bookstore, or prepay direct to us)—

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