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SETTLING MUD, RUNNING STREAMS, AND "THE WHOLE THING ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN": SUBVERTING CLASSICAL DISCOURSE AND THE ROLE OF CHARACTER IN GERTRUDE STEIN'S "MELANCTHA"

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“THE WHOLE THING ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN”:
SUBVERTING CLASSICAL DISCOURSE AND THE ROLE OF
CHARACTER IN GERTRUDE STEIN’S “MELANCTHA”

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

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2014

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SETTLING MUD, RUNNING STREAMS, AND “THE WHOLE THING ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN”: SUBVERTING CLASSICAL DISCOURSE AND THE ROLE OF CHARACTER IN GERTRUDE STEIN’S “MELANCTHA”

The thesis begins by exploring Stein’s autobiographical connections to the Jamesian concepts of bottom nature and habit, in an attempt to demonstrate that both, in the pen of Gertrude Stein, are as connected to classical virtue theory and the development of character as a moral state and characters as created persons within her creative oeuvre, as they are connected to psychological experiments in William James’ laboratory. In wading through what may seem to be muddy waters of Stein’s slippery definitions and circular sentences, the thesis shows that Stein uses the discourse of classical virtue theory to achieve her goal—breaking down clear barriers to the virtuous life as classically understood and subverting the very building blocks of Western thought generally. Lastly, “Melanctha: Each One As She May” will become a case study through which the thesis wrestles in detail with Stein’s complicated virtue and character project as she pulls virtuous action into a separate sphere from the virtuous person in order to explore what human nature is, or, as she says, “the whole thing about men and women that is interesting.”

KEYWORDS: Gertrude Stein, Melanctha, Classical Virtue, Character, Discourse

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March 26, 2014

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My writing is clear as mud, but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear, perhaps that is the reason but really there is no reason that the earth is round and that no one knows the limits of the universe that is the whole thing about men and women that is interesting.

Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

Books about Gertrude Stein's life and works often steal her quirkily articulated clear-as-mud quote for their epigraphs—at least the first sixteen words: “My writing is clear as mud, but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear” (*Everybody's Autobiography* 126).

And certainly to many casual and critical readers alike, Stein's writing does seem “clear as mud.” Richard Bridgeman characterizes it as an “unruly mélange” (xvi), difficult to sift through and in which to find coherence. Yet the name Gertrude Stein continues to be recognizable to many average readers outside academic circles, even today. Certainly she was a celebrity of sorts in her own day; *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* introduced Americans to a celebrity culture—the artists, writers, and other creative types—that surrounded Stein in Paris in the early twentieth century. Stein lectured widely and was sought out by young American writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald—names never left out of even the most rudimentary of textbook canons. Some critics credit Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo with the early success of modernist painters such as Picasso and Matisse, also household names. And yet apart from *The Autobiography*, in which Stein writes of herself in the third person, her own written work, which includes fiction, essays, character sketches, plays, and poems, was not widely read during her lifetime, nor is it popularly read today outside of the classroom.

Indeed, it often seems as if Stein's celebrity-status fame and the obliqueness of her literary work are contradictory. Consider that Gertrude Stein shows up as the

character in Woody Allen's 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*—a character who offers pivotal writing advice to Allen's author-protagonist, advice that brings both his writing and romantic crises and the film itself to a resolution—yet an English graduate student once told me he would rather gouge out his eyes than read a page of Stein's work. What is it about Gertrude Stein that has so captivated and yet so frustrated readers attempting to delve into her work?

Consider Bridgeman's confession in his introduction to *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*: “When I originally undertook a systematic reading of Gertrude Stein, it was in the expectation of learning how to decipher even the most resistant of her works. That particularly naïve assumption has long since been dispelled. Still, the surest way to begin understanding this unruly mélange is to familiarize oneself with its actual features” (xvi).

Its “actual features.”

During her lifetime, Stein refused to explain her work in a definitive and didactic manner, arguing that it stands on its own. Stein “did not understand why since the writing was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work” (*Toklas* 35). Yet even the most accessible of her fiction—certainly *Three Lives* is the most linear within each story and the most-often anthologized of her work to appear in undergraduate American literature textbooks—was received with some scathing reviews. Stein maintained that the reader who simply reads will understand. Her friend Carl Van Vechten, in “How to Read Gertrude Stein,” writes, “Miss Stein has no explanation to offer regarding her work. I have often questioned her, but I have met with no satisfaction. She asks you to read” (in Curnutt, 155). *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein's 1937 follow-up to the smashing success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, has been

considered by some publishers to be “in fact one of the most direct books Gertrude Stein ever wrote” (ix). Still, even this praise is tempered: “Direct, but it wouldn’t be Stein if it weren’t also maddeningly, delightfully oblique,” a drawback that made it “[p]redictably...a failure” (ix, viii).

Revisiting Stein’s claim that her writing is “clear as mud” sheds some light on the “actual features” of her work, if we look past those first oft-quoted sixteen words. “My writing is clear as mud, but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear,” she writes, “perhaps that is the reason but really there is no reason that the earth is round and that no one knows the limits of the universe that is *the whole thing about men and women that is interesting*” (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 126-27, my emphasis).

By making the beginning portion of this quote stand on its own, we focus on the clarity of the writing—the streams that can be made to run clear once the mud settles. But those streams “run on and disappear,” Stein says; they leave no lasting impression.

Still, Stein reminds us, the world is round.

On a round globe, Stein may be suggesting, streams—stories—*don’t* disappear. They run on and on and on, and “no one knows the limits of the universe.” This repetition of story is what makes story interesting, “the *whole* thing about men and women,” in fact, “that is interesting” (my emphasis).

It is easy to become scientific in our unpacking of Stein’s oeuvre—counting how often a word appears, calculating how meanings shift with repetition, tracing how vocalized sounds change a text’s tone, mapping out a story’s non-linearity to show Stein’s nuanced counter-story under the surface of an otherwise straightforward narrative.

Indeed, Stein criticism frequently falls into these habits, which requires a question: why are readers and critics alike so determined to make the mud run clear?

Instead, what happens if we focus on “the whole thing” that is interesting about men and women? What if “the whole thing” is the human element of the characters themselves? In her nonfiction, her fiction, and her autobiographical works, Stein focuses on people as characters and characters as people, even offering herself as a character of sorts in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. What if the characters move into the foreground, rather than the writing itself? What if the words—carefully chosen, indeed, by Stein, as she has emphasized elsewhere—are the scaffolding on which characters unfold? And not just character *types* being developed, but particular characters within her narratives who are themselves developing character?

A passing reference in *Everybody's Autobiography* to “character” offers an opening to this discussion: “In those comparatively young days... I thought everybody had a character and I knew it and I liked them to be in character” (4-5). Stein leaves vague the “when” of these “comparatively young days,” but they have certainly passed by the time of her lecture tour in the United States in the thirties. Her conception of “character” here combines both character-as-persona, similar to a character in a play, as if “all the world’s a stage,” with something more than a role. It is identity fashioned from what individual people—perhaps other “geniuses” like herself—are able to put on or step into and also a key part of what it means to be a human being. “I thought *everybody* had a character and I knew it” (my emphasis).

The word “character” has roots in the ancient Greek word for the tool used to chisel a permanent design, a distinctive carving, an impression, perhaps like an author

chiseling away to shape characters with her text and chiseling out her own role as author-creator in the process. Absorbed into Latin and French and Middle English, “character” evolved to incorporate the design, carving, or symbol itself that was being imposed in the process, and by the mid-1600s began to convey the more figurative senses of “character” today: features or traits characteristic of moral qualities or constitution, as well as the concreteness of a character as a persona within a work of literature. And when Stein uses “character” in this fleeting passage, the weight of this word through the centuries attempts to pin Stein down to meaning and clarity. Her words, in typical Stein fashion, resist.

It is particularly the sliver of this slippery concept of “character” related to moral qualities that interests me and has the potential to lead to a fruitful discussion of Stein’s understanding of virtue and, I will argue, her subversion of classical definitions. As the mother of a precocious one year old, the wife of a virtue ethicist whose convictions hearken to Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, a poet, and the lover of a good book, I cannot help but acknowledge that questions of character development are a reality in my everyday life. For me, it is not an intellectual, heady pursuit but a matter of ordinary life lived out. Does the early fiction of Gertrude Stein and her subversion of classical virtue theory have something to contribute to this very-real discussion of what it means to grow into a virtuous human being in the world? It’s a lofty question with a down-to-earth answer: yes.

Stein studies overlook the connection to classical virtue theory present in Stein’s early work and instead focus on her connection to psychology through William James. While fruitful in the past, there’s still something new to be seen through new lenses.

William James's psychology, after all, was still part of the discipline of philosophy at Harvard in the late 1800s, and Stein herself was a philosophy major. Why has Stein research not mentioned her exposure to Plato's four virtues delineated in his *Republic*, when two of those four make repeated appearances in her early fiction and her autobiographies? Why, when Aristotle connects virtue to character and habituation, do scholars skip over *Nicomachean Ethics* in favor of William James's work with habits of attention?

Rather than focusing in on the Jamesian concept of word "associations" or his habits of attention as we unpack Stein's use of virtue language—especially specific cardinal virtue words like "courage" and "wisdom"—a Foucaultian approach opens up new understandings of Stein's word project.

In the *Discourse on Language* Foucault articulates the way a seeming cultural love of discourse is, in actuality, a fear. And this fear of discourse leads to the attempt "to master and control the great proliferation of discourse" (228), to rein it in and control it, to take away that which makes it dangerous. It becomes an insect: this "incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse" (229). Of Foucault's three avenues to analyzing the fear of discourse: "to question our will to truth; to restore to discourse its character as an event; to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier" (229), this latter tactic, I will argue, sounds uncannily like Stein's project regarding virtue language and moral development of character. By taking one of the key classical understandings of virtue—in particular the understanding that there can be no virtue apart from virtuous action, that is, no character who behaves badly can have character—and subverting it through her own

narratives, as I will show, Stein's word-virtue-character project can arguably place her as a predecessor to Foucault.

I'll begin by backing up and exploring Stein's autobiographical connections to the Jamesian concepts of bottom nature and habit, in an attempt to demonstrate that both, in the pen of Gertrude Stein, are as connected to classical virtue theory and the development of character as a moral state and characters as created persons within her creative oeuvre, as they are connected to psychological experiments in William James' laboratory. In wading through what may seem to be muddy waters of Stein's slippery definitions and circular sentences, I'll show that Stein is using the discourse of classical virtue theory to achieve her goal—breaking down clear barriers to the virtuous life as classically understood and subverting the very building blocks of western thought generally. What else is virtue, after all, apart from the foundation of human interaction? Lastly, “Melantha: Each One As She May” will become a case study through which I wrestle in detail with Stein's complicated virtue and character project as she pulls virtuous action into a separate sphere from the virtuous person in order to explore what human nature is, or, as she says, “the whole thing about men and women that is interesting.”

Chapter 2

Muddy Waters: Stein's Historical Moment, Philosophy, and the Necessity of Subversion

There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking.

Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" 215

Biographies of the life and work of Gertrude Stein range from the succinct, purse-sized, and helpful, like Jane Palatini Bowers's 1993 *Gertrude Stein*, part of the Women Writers Series, to the fragile and disintegrating copy of Donald Sutherland's 1951 biography hidden away on the library shelf. A novel approach is taken by Rachel Cohen in *A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854-1967*: Cohen describes a brief—and fictional—interaction between James and Stein in order to capture the essence of their relationship, in order to suggest, as so many full-length biographies articulate in detail, the long-term effects of Jamesian psychology on the writing of Stein. Other biographies focus on Stein as a celebrity, and readers, while quite entertained, might begin to wonder if the purpose of the biography is to explore the work of Stein or describe her relationships with other famous people. Janet Hobhouse's *Everybody Who Was Anybody* and James Mellow's *Charmed Circle*, the titles themselves emphasizing Stein's circle of famous friends, achieve both tasks, but these chatty and accessible biographies do lack a depth of critical engagement with her work. Even so, Hobhouse, Mellow, and others would be remiss not to mention most of the key terms associated with Stein: repetition, continuous present, automation, character types, and consciousness, all often explicitly connected with psychology and the work of William James. Mellow does offer, however, more information than others about Stein's years at Radcliffe, and, in particular, the academic courses and other professors with whom Stein

would have studied in addition to William James. Still, James—the psychologist and his work—certainly tends to dominate Steinian critical discourse.

Indeed, it is impossible to write about the influences on Gertrude Stein without addressing the role of William James, as so many have done. Rosalind Miller, for one, considers him “the greatest influence” on Stein’s early writing, pointing to his chapters on “The Stream of Consciousness” and “The Sense of Time” in the 1890 *Psychology*. Lisa Ruddick calls James “Stein’s one intellectual father, the person who contributed most to her first expressions of artistic power” (14). Steven Meyer, who argues for the influence of Stein’s scientific background—much of which was spent in James’ psychology laboratory—on her compositional techniques and shift from science to writing, dedicates a third of his monograph to the James-Stein influence.

And the connections are not a stretch. In addition to the academic faculty-student connection and the scientific connection of automatism experiments done in the psychology laboratories during Stein’s undergraduate years, which included the publication of her first article with Leon Solomons, is the connection Gertrude Stein herself lays out in *Lectures in America* regarding her developing understanding of character types being rooted in the psychology laboratory:

While I was at college...[t]hen as I say I became more interested in psychology, and one of the things I did was testing reactions of the average college student in a state of normal activity and in the state of fatigue induced by their examinations. I was supposed to be interested in their reactions but soon I found that I was not but instead that I was enormously interested in the types of their characters that is what I even then thought of as the bottom nature of them, and when in May 1898 I wrote my half of the report of these experiments I expressed these results as follows:

In these descriptions it will be readily observed that habits of attention are reflexes of the complete character of the individual. (137-38)

I'll return to the Steinien concept of "character types" and "bottom nature" in a moment, but what is important here is the connection Stein makes between her increasing interest in psychology and her growing perceptive readings of people.

Many scholars have spent pages discussing the connection between William James's work on habit—habits of attention, in particular—and Stein's concepts of "types." After all, she uses the phrase "habits of attention" here, reportedly in her write-up about the experiments. Without denigrating that analysis, it has become clear to me that much more can be gleaned from Stein's perceptive descriptions, her concept of character types, than merely discussing habit and the role of William James. Still, according to Stein herself, Stein's personal interest during her undergraduate years was William James, however factual or fictitious their interactions reported later by Stein may have been.

Though the veracity of her account in *Alice B. Toklas* of receiving a postcard from William James after walking out of an exam she did "not feel a bit like" taking (79) has been questioned by scholars, it is not an understatement to suggest that even from the beginning of her academic experience, Stein adored William James. In what are now referred to as "the Radcliffe themes," the essays written during her required English composition course (1894-95), and first reprinted as part of Rosalind Miller's *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility*, Stein's high esteem of James shines through:

Is life worth living? Yes, a thousand times yes when the world still holds such spirits as Prof. James. He is truly a man among men; a scientist of force and originality embodying all that is strongest and worthiest in the scientific spirit.... He stands firmly, nobly for the dignity of man. His faith is not that of a cringing coward before an all-powerful master, but of a strong man willing to fight, to suffer and endure.... What can one say more? He is a strong sane noble personality reacting truly on all

experience that life has given him. He is a man take him for all in all.
(Stein, in Miller 146)

(As for the overly dramatic opening question, it should be noted that “Is Life Worth Living?” was the title of a lecture first offered by William James at Harvard in 1895 and printed in various forms and publications, including *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* [1899].) Stein would understatedly write later, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, that “the really lasting impression of her Radcliffe life came through William James” (78). Also, “William James delighted her. His personality and his teaching and his way of amusing himself and his students all pleased her” (*Toklas* 78). It is no wonder that scholars have thus far focused on her psychological experiments in William James’s laboratory as a key—if not to deciphering her text, at least to expanding our understanding of her project.

It is worth pausing for a moment to note the complex moment in which Stein found herself studying philosophy at Harvard and how it relates to Foucault’s first of the three potential solutions he offers to respond to the cultural fear of discourse: the questioning of the will to truth (229). When Foucault describes the will to truth or the will to knowledge, he offers the academic world and classroom as partly responsible for perpetuating the culture of codification that keeps discourse in check. Foucault “believe[s] that this will to knowledge, thus reliant upon institutional support and distribution, tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse...[and] daily grows in strength, in depth and implacability” (219). Consider the role of William James at the turn of the twentieth century in the academy. James, often called the father of American psychology, made a career at the intersection of philosophy, psychology, and physiology. The newness of psychology as its own

discipline and the growing interest in the psychology laboratory to study the inner workings of the human mind and even religious and spiritual experience stands in stark contrast to an older, classical understanding of pedagogy, not to mention the study of classical virtue and human nature. James was writing a new discourse of sorts—as the author of perhaps the first psychology textbooks—and also reframing the discourse passed down from ancient Greece. How could this shaping, constraining, and scientizing of discourse not influence the likes of an impressionable literary-minded philosopher such as Gertrude Stein?

In addition to the influence of James in the academy at the time, both George Santayana and Josiah Royce were significant philosophy voices at Harvard, and both had connections to Gertrude Stein, who in addition to her coursework and majoring in philosophy, served as the secretary of the Philosophy Club during her undergraduate years. Santayana, a poet and aesthete, published his monograph *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) during Stein's undergraduate years, and Royce, a professor of the history of philosophy, served as the chair of the philosophy department from 1894 until 1898.

We know that Gertrude Stein took other philosophy courses in addition to those taught by Professor James, though certainly she did end up in seven of his classes, including time spent in his psychology laboratory. Even Stein's Philosophy I course is often described by biographers as being taught "by" James—psychology was a new field and did not yet exist as a separate department—but his contribution was alongside lectures by Santayana and George Herbert Palmer, who was a professor of natural religion, moral philosophy, and civil polity. Additionally, Stein's other philosophy courses included Royce's metaphysics, comparative religion, and German philosophy.

(Stein's coursework has been detailed by many biographers. Linda Wagner-Martin waded through all of Stein's letters and academic paraphernalia housed at Yale and Harvard, and chronicled both the academic and personal family life of Gertrude Stein in *Favored Strangers*. Richard Bridgeman's *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* includes an appendix of all Stein's coursework while she was at Radcliffe and Miller's *Form and Intelligibility* reprints the full text of her freshmen English composition themes; nearly all biographies summarize her coursework.)

With Stein absorbing the history of knowledge in the classroom—a prime location, for Foucault, of discourse constraint and interpretation—majoring in philosophy, and studying under William James, it comes as no surprise that her later thinking and work reflect a question of what discourse is and how it controls what is true when it comes to human nature, specifically what it means for human beings to be virtuous or act virtuously. When Stein mentions her observation of a “bottom nature” of the volunteers during the experiments in the psychology laboratory of William James, these are the concerns she demonstrably works through. Her first publication, in fact, was a co-written piece with Leon Solomons on Normal Motor Automatism, which appeared in the *Psychological Review* in 1896, based on her search for truth within the laboratory system. Solomons and Stein explored whether writing, reading, and understanding can happen unconsciously or automatically. (Perhaps because of her scientific interests and certainly because of her difficult and unwieldy writing style, Stein would later be accused of automatism in her own writing, which she roundly denied [Mellow 33].)

During these automatism experiments in the laboratory, Stein, in Hoffman's view, became “mainly interested in the people involved in her experiments and not the data

they provided; not their reactions to what they were doing but how they seemed to her to manifest themselves as prototypes” (130). Certainly Stein’s claims about character types and the tendencies of the laboratory volunteers to say the same sorts of things could be narrowly interpreted as “prototypes,” especially due to Stein’s experimental writing style and the ways she portrays her characters with shades of character in the moral sense. But this interpretation of her comments about what she learned during her time in the laboratory strikes me as a little unfair and only begets a narrow reading of works like *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, both in which, says Hoffman, “the characters function almost solely as demonstrations of a proposition made by the author about a personality type” (132). What Stein says about those experiments is more complex:

[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 until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that 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. (*Lectures* 138)

Though Stein calls this endless similarity and endless difference the “bottom nature” of people she describes later as she recollects her time in the laboratory, this “nature” need not be understood as prototypes of human nature to be used for the purposes of an author’s exploration of personality types. Such an understanding of the project she undertakes in portraying her characters specifically and human beings more generally limits Stein’s author role to that of prescriptive describer, rather than nuanced observer of humanity attempting to articulate the difficult contradictions of human action and human conviction, as we will see as we discuss the role of virtue and virtuous behavior. A reading of Stein that focuses in on Stein’s intentional dismantling of the discourse often underlying discussions of virtuous behavior versus virtuous individuals offers a more

complex view of “bottom nature.” We will find this to be the case upon closer inspection of Stein’s characters in “Melanctha” and Stein’s broader project to capture the “the thing about men and women that is interesting.”

But the question remains: when Stein tells us that her conclusion about the “bottom nature” of people is that “habits of attention are reflexes of the complete character of the individual” (*Lectures* 138), what sort of “character” does she mean? What is “complete character”? Does she mean a moral compass that guides the individual toward right (or “good,” as Melanctha strives to be)? Or does she mean the way individuals act out a narrative like roles within a play, bestowed with certain predetermined or established characteristics by their nature as human beings in the world? The word “character” in modern English is not simply defined and has added so many layers of meaning since its initial use as a tool or implement for imprinting or embossing. According to Jennifer Ashton, “for both James and Stein, character comes down to habit” (305). And, as Stein tells us in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “everything is a habit” (54, my emphasis). The first sentence of James’s chapter on habit in his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*—published prior to Stein’s enrollment at Harvard—strikes the same chord: “When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits.” Animals and human beings alike, according to James, consist of habitual behavior on some level, some innate or instinctive and others learned through education and, in the case of human beings, reason.

What James goes on to say about habit, however, is not able to capture Stein’s broad use of the term, especially the way she connects habit to character—and, tangentially, to other things in the world, like the “habit” of national revolution occurring

within countries like France (*Everybody's Autobiography* 54). James makes habit a physical, scientific principle, rather than a philosophical, aesthetic, or moral concern: “[T]he philosophy of habit is... a chapter in physics rather than in physiology or psychology. That it is at bottom a physical principle is admitted by all good recent writers on the subject” (105). Stein’s initial work on habit may have begun in the scientific laboratory, but her conclusions did not remain there and instead incorporate a continual questioning of just what it means to be a human being—what similarities and differences were being repeated by the fellow students studied through the experiments? What was the “bottom nature” of humanity being revealed? And how did Stein’s observations in the laboratory fit in with the classical philosophical discourse being filtered through her other coursework?

Overviews of classical philosophy at Harvard at the turn of the century would certainly have included at least a wave of the hand toward Aristotelian and Platonic thought, if not explicit and extended study. The role of virtue in Aristotelian ethics could reasonably have infiltrated Stein’s understanding of the bottom nature of human beings. To read her early work in terms of the question “What does it mean to live a virtuous life?” might trigger new understandings of her early work’s significance. As outlined above, we know that Stein’s Philosophy I course was an overview of religious philosophy, so why need we assume it was only under the tutelage of Professor James in the psychology laboratory and her work on automation with Leon Solomons that Stein’s understanding of character would have been shaped? Surely it is unfair to her learning capacity, her education, and her creative genius to assume her time studying automatism and unconscious habit in the lab was the sole influence on her later career’s ongoing

work developing character and characters, cultivating an aesthetic, and engaging in cultural critique. Involved in all of this work, at some level, is an ongoing interest in human nature generally and the role of virtue and vice more particularly.

It is important to remember that the initial drafting of Stein's early works, three of which transform Stein's personal romantic and platonic experiences into the recycled and linked plots of *Fernhurst*, *Q.E.D.*, and "Melanctha," were likely composed soon after her formal education came to an end. And in each of them, virtue and vice broadly as well as specific virtues and virtuous behavior are poked and prodded by characters and by the narrative voice. Though our later conversation will explore this potential virtue-loaded reading of "Melanctha" in particular, Stein's most explicit virtue project, we should keep in mind that *each* of these early versions of the same narrative are nudging at the same thing.

In "Adele," for example, the first part of *Q.E.D.*, Adele tells Helen and Sophie,

You don't realise the important fact that virtue and vice have it in common that they are vulgar when not passionately given. You think that they carry within them a different power. Yes they do because they have different world-values, but as for their relation to vulgarity, it is as true of vice as of virtue that you can't sell what should be passionately given without forcing yourself into many acts of vulgarity and the chances are that in endeavoring to escape the vulgarity of virtue, you will find yourselves engulfed in the vulgarity of vice. (207-208)

The connections of "Melanctha" and *Q.E.D.* and the real-life love affairs of Stein during graduate school have been detailed elsewhere. Adele is Stein, we are told; Jeff Campbell is Stein. But, while interesting and helpful for some readings of the text, these connections can be limiting rather than helpful when offered as the go-to interpretation of Stein's project, especially when, as a result, autobiographical exploration displaces thematic interpretation.

Even though the three texts “Melanctha,” *Q.E.D.*, and *Fernhurst*, I suggest, help illustrate Stein’s initial prodding of virtue, vice, and human nature, it is only fair to acknowledge that such themes of virtue that appear in at least *Q.E.D.* and “Melanctha” sound more like echoes than coincidences, more like a repeated exploration on the part of Stein into the ways the discourse of virtue plays out among interpersonal relationships, rather than a deliberate articulation of what virtue is or the struggle to live it out. In the earlier *Q.E.D.*, however, Stein arguably explores the potential for disrupting and subverting what it means to have virtue, to act virtuously, and to be virtuous.

Q.E.D. introduces “courage” in a similar manner to “Melanctha,” as we will see in concrete ways throughout chapters two and three. Stein’s narrator describes Helen’s “courage and daring”: “Her courage never fails and that is what makes her father so bitter,” Sophie tells Adele, who replies, “Helen has courage I don’t doubt that” (220). Stein, here as in “Melanctha,” makes courage and other virtue-words more complex than readers might first realize. To be virtuous is to exhibit the virtues, so to be courageous is to display courage consistently; more classical understandings of virtue could not acknowledge a courageous person behaving any way other than courageous. Stein has already begun to disrupt these understandings in her earliest drafts of fiction, separating definitions of virtue from lived out virtuous experience.

I’ll explore the ambiguity of Stein’s language later, but for now consider one more example from *Q.E.D.* which muddies the waters of virtue ethics even more. Adele—the character most identified with Stein herself—replies to Helen’s praising of Adele’s honesty, “‘Oh honest,’ returned Adele lightly. ‘Honesty is a *selfish virtue*. Yes I am honest enough’” (213-14, my emphasis). What are readers to make of a “selfish

virtue”? Isn’t a “virtue” by definition something that is *not* selfish? In “Melanctha,” Rose, too, was described as having paradoxical “selfish wisdom.” At the very least, Stein is learning here in her early career—or, rather, before Stein could even be said to have had a career—to try to broaden the definitions established by the discourse of classical virtue. Stein distinguishes between innate character types and the actions of lived experience—and these are, unparadoxically, two sides of the same coin, as the cliché goes. That “coin” is virtue.

If virtue-laden readings of Stein’s written work seem far-fetched, consider Stein’s personal correspondence cited, among other places, in Mellow’s biography. Indeed morality was, at the very least, a topic of discussion among Stein’s group of educated women friends in Baltimore. In a letter to Stein from Emma Lootz, for instance, Lootz writes, “I did look disapproving when you said you had been marauding with your friends, but I may as well believe you when you say you were good tho [*sic*] I’m afraid our conceptions of virtue differ” (Mellow 60). Perhaps what we need to explore are these questions: what *was* Stein’s “conception” of virtue? Could a closer look at her early works, especially “Melanctha,” in terms of her exploration of virtue open up her later works for readers and critics alike? What could it mean to our appreciation of Stein’s project to define “character” with all of its shades of meaning: from an imprinting tool, to the imprint itself, to an identifying characteristic, to moral qualities, to the created persons within a text? What if we keep Foucault close at hand as we describe Stein’s separation of traditional discourse about virtue and character and habit from the academy in which she was taught to converse in those terms?

These questions, I will show, are more related than they may at first appear, and help to reveal new understandings of Stein's complicated and ongoing project to capture and critique human nature and, also, to locate herself as genius-writer within it.

Chapter 3

Running Clear: Word Choice, Character, and the Complexity of Stein's Project

So it was with Gertrude's repetitive sentences, each one building up, phrase by phrase, the substance of her characters.

James Mellow, *Charmed Circle* 71

Jane Palatini Bowers suggests that Stein, while writing *Three Lives*,

discovered that language could do other things besides name, describe, and report. It could, for instance, embody rhythms.... If freed from intention and expectation...language could also play.... In Stein's work, then, the objective world becomes less and less important and the object that is the work of art and the process by which it is created become paramount. (35)

Three Lives, in fact, was “acknowledged later as the earliest modernist, experimental fiction” (Bowers 6), though Stein wouldn't necessarily have agreed. In *Toklas*, we find that Stein considered *The Making of Americans* to be “the beginning, really the beginning of modern writing” (215). Regardless, Stein's words *were* doing something new, changing the narrative landscape and carving out what it meant to be a twentieth-century modernist. Whether it was Stein's purpose to make language “play” is up for discussion as is the “object that is the work of art” becoming “paramount,” but Bowers is correct to note Stein's ability to “free” language “from intention and expectation”—and not just the intention and expectation of her contemporary readers or reviewers or fellow artists and friends, but past generations of readers and writers and artists and philosophers, those who have controlled what is said about knowledge and human nature, and those who will continue to control it. Here again Foucault's articulation about the way discourse has been controlled at a widespread cultural level helps us understand how Stein begins to “free” her language from this control.

In her lecture “What Is English Literature?” Stein traces the decisions modernist writers need to make back to the Elizabethan period: “There was a choice between serving god and mammon. This choice has nothing to do with religion, it has nothing to do with success. It has to do with something different than that, it has to do with completion.... And words had everything to do with it” (*Lectures 22, 23*). It is the deliberate act of choosing words—acknowledging the power that words have within a writer’s milieu and then crafting art intentionally in ways that shape this power and, potentially, subvert it through the written work—that marks the work as complete. And the evolution of words is ongoing. In classic Stein obscurity combined with chattiness, she says,

This makes literature words whether you choose them whether you use them, whether they are there whether or not you use them and whether they are no longer there even when you are still going on using them. And in this way a century is a century. One century has words, another century chooses words, another century uses words and then another century using the words no longer has them.

All this as you have it inside you settles something it settles what you complete if you complete anything, it settles whether you address something as you express anything. In short it settles what you do as you proceed to write which you certainly do, that is which I certainly do. (*Lectures 27*)

Stein’s confession “that is which I certainly do” reminds us that she, too, is a product of the generations that have gone before; former centuries’ choice of words, use of words, has settled inside her in such a way as to enable her to complete “anything.”

In the way previous centuries’ words shape the work of modern writers—if those writers “address something,” that is—the influence acts as a subconscious shaping and framing of the writers’ works, partly because of subconscious associations of particular words. This is not to say that Stein’s writing or word choice is subconscious. On the contrary, Stein was constantly aware, perhaps too aware, of her project of redefining and

subverting discourse to convey new meaning: “I have been the creative literary mind of the century,” she announces matter-of-factly in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (22). “I am the most important writer writing today” (29). The “genius” of her work is in her ability to take the subconscious word-association cloud floating around the modern world and intentionally poking and prodding those word associations to subvert the status quo, at least in regard to human nature, habit, and character.

Word choice is at the heart of Gertrude Stein’s writing, and central to her meaning-making-and-remaking project. Jonathan Levin connects the linguistic experiments of William James, rather than his work on the unconscious or habits of attention as so many other Stein scholars do, to Stein’s understanding of the role of words. James’s word exercises sought to empty words of meaning by “reduc[ing them] to a bare sensation” (Levin 151). Levin links this meaning-emptying of words to Stein’s writing, but notes a slight difference:

She follows William James in recognizing that words acquire meaning from the mind’s stock of associations, but she refuses to allow habitual patterns of association to obscure the multiple associative contexts of words.

Stein’s writing, especially those aspects of it which have seemed so enigmatic, is designed to resist the repose that would put an end to the continuous movement of perception and understanding. Her style develops, and endlessly changes over time, from the conviction that perception and conception are essentially dynamic processes that we renew and transform in every new moment of language use. The continuous present which she seeks to represent is the dynamic moment of this renewal and transformation. Stein’s words are always in transition, foregrounding the processes that make and remake meanings. (154)

Whereas James focused in on the stagnation of word association, a frozen or closed system, Stein allowed for myriad and dynamic interpretations and reinterpretations of words. With her repeated use of virtue words, like “wisdom” and “courage” in “Melanctha” or the more benign “good” throughout *Three Lives*, Stein offers shades of

these words to her readers and to the characters themselves being described. Indeed, part of “meaning” being remade over and over in the text is the respect offered to Stein’s characters on the page that is offered to human characters in real life: the freedom to shift and change and not be trapped by the propensity to behave or misbehave in acceptable and unacceptable ways. Stein’s words that “seem so enigmatic” are what make her so confident—perhaps rightly—in her own creative genius, subverting the acceptable discourse of literature and of classical philosophy by muddying the waters.

Because Stein’s word choice is arguably particular, it is hard to synthesize her strong sense of purpose and specificity of language I’m arguing for here with her writing technique, at least as articulated by her friend Carl Van Vechten. Praising her “unique” method, Van Vechten describes it thus: “She usually writes in the morning, and she sets down the words as they come from her pen; they bubble, they flow; they surge through her brain and she sets them down. You may regard them as nonsense, but the fact remains that effective imitations of her style do not exist” (in Curnutt 155). Is it reasonable to believe that her words do just “bubble” and “flow” from her pen as she sits meditatively each morning? Perhaps. Or perhaps the image of the flowing pen is one Stein promulgated to emphasize the role of the genius writer she was reputed to be, or at least the image she reported to have. Her notebooks, which were transcribed by Toklas and eventually preserved in the Yale Libraries, illustrate a complex drafting process that includes, at the very least, crossed out words, playful experimentation, and notes to Toklas throughout (see Dydo). Regardless of whether Stein wrote as the inspired genius she claimed to be or not, the way that the mechanics of words, grammatical conventions,

sounds, and her historical milieu work together to create meaning fascinated Stein throughout her career.

In fact, Stein used the mechanics of writing as a means of explaining in her lectures what she saw as a shift in writing *emphasis* through the centuries: from the *words* of the seventeenth century, to *phrases* of the eighteenth century, to *sentences* of the nineteenth century, to *paragraphs* of the twentieth (see *Lectures* 42-49). She places herself in the twentieth century, with her powerful use of paragraphs. And yet, not surprisingly to her readers, it is not Stein's paragraphs that literary critics spend their own paragraphs and pages upon pages explaining, defining, poking, and prodding. It is her words within those paragraphs. The image of muddied streams running clear as they flow around the globe is a helpful metaphor here, too—from words to phrases to sentences to paragraphs to the words that make up those paragraphs: it is all genius flowing from the pencil of Gertrude Stein.

Stein's words—their precision as well as lack thereof—have been a stumbling block to readers and educated critics alike since her earliest publications. Compared to James Joyce, for example, another modernist, “Stein did not seem learned. Her primitive and childlike vocabulary provoked condescending smiles” (Dydo 13). In her pursuit of publication for *Three Lives*, Stein was treated as if she were not a native English speaker, despite her own conviction that her writing was indeed straightforward and precise. Writing of herself in the third person, Stein reports, “Later she did not understand why since the writing [in *Three Lives*] was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work” (*Toklas* 35).

When *Three Lives*, “the book that ushered in the modern period in American fiction” (Charters vii), was published in 1909, the reviews were somewhat diverse, ranging from the accusation that the “stories utterly lack construction and focus” (Curnutt 11) to the more nuanced claim that “the slow, broken rhythm of the prose corresponds to the rhythm of the ‘lives’ and to the reader’s rhythmic comprehension” (12). One anonymous reviewer suggested that if Stein “should attempt the same things with minds of a higher caliber, the result might be more entertaining” (9). It’s not a bad suggestion, really, if “entertainment” were high on Stein’s list of motivations to write at the turn of the century. But such was not the case. One reviewer, in particular, begins to capture the essence of Stein’s narrative project and is worth noting for its being the exception in the ocean of negativity: “Not written in the vernacular, it yet gives that impression. At first one fancies the author using repetition as a refrain is used in poetry. But it is something more subtle still; something involved, something turning back, for a new beginning, for a lost strand in the spinning” (10). Indeed, Stein’s project is one of subtlety, a subtle subversion of the very words that seem elementary, childlike, repetitive. Stein’s writing and her characters turn and return to the basics of behavior and human nature, discovering and rediscovering and questioning what it can possibly mean to be virtuous, to act virtuously, to live in the complex world of “good” and “nice,” a world of “wisdom” and “courage” and, yet, “wandering.” Stein herself wanders back to the words as she searches for “a lost strand in the spinning.”

Stein describes her writing of “*Melantha*” in the often cited 1926 lecture, “Composition as Explanation”:

I wrote a negro story called *Melantha*. In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of

being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. . . . I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that, I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural. (220)

Stein once again falls back on her role as the genius writer in claiming that she herself did not even know why the story unfolded as it did in the “prolonged present” though to her “it was natural.” The oft-discussed “continuous present” in Stein’s collection, I want to suggest, supports Stein’s project as I describe it: a complex subversion of the way human nature and experience are captured on the page. Virtue and vice and decisions and immobility and contradiction in lived experience are worth exploring and it takes a Gertrude Stein figure—confident, even arrogant, with both literary and laboratory and philosophical training—to capture that complexity in every moment of a story as it unfolds and refolds back on itself. Perhaps this echoes the anonymous reviewer’s perception of “something turning back, for a new beginning.”

The jarring difference of Stein’s writing from that of her contemporaries might disguise some of the subtlety of Stein’s project, though *Three Lives*, in general, is one of the most narrative and straightforward of the texts in her oeuvre. Something subtle, something readers can lose in the repetition, has been established here and in the seeming hundreds of books published about Stein’s work over the last half century. Most important to Stein’s project as I hope to present it is the precision and rhythm of the language that turns words and phrases back on themselves to add meaning, “for a new beginning,” as the reviewer wrote, rather than merely point to the stark inability of the English language to capture the essence of human nature—though it may be arguable Stein attempts to do both.

What is most pertinent about Stein's use of language, her use of precise words in a seemingly repetitive way, is her commitment to writing "directly." "Any one can use words to say something," Stein writes.

And in using these words to say what he has to say he may use those words directly or indirectly. If he uses these words indirectly he says what he intends to have heard by somebody who is to hear and in so doing inevitably he has to serve mammon. [...] Now serving god for a writer who is writing is writing anything directly, it makes no difference what it is but it must be direct, the relation between the thing done and the doer must be direct. In this way there is completion and the essence of the completed thing is completion. (*Lectures 23-24*)

For Stein, "the relationship between the thing done and the doer must be direct" in order for writing to be complete. By "complete," Stein suggests that the written work stems directly from the writer's being authentic, rather than for the reader's reception of the word.

Bowers argues, however, that Stein's goal in her repetition of words is the opposite of precision of language, that it is rather the unreliability of it: "Stein demonstrates this chameleon-like quality of language through the use of repetition. The more she repeats a word or a phrase, the more she reveals its unreliability" (50). But if Stein's goal is completeness and writing directly—that is, serving god rather than mammon, as Stein herself says—perhaps language isn't *unreliable* but *especially* reliable; what if it is the readers and the cultural milieu that are unreliable in their reception of the work? The writer's goal is not reception but precision and clarity in conveying the human experience, in conveying character, in conveying the difficulty of expectations and life and the words that convey our core experiences being handed down through generations in a way that is unlivable and unreliable.

When the writer succeeds in writing directly, however, it could be argued from Stein's lecture that the reader can sense the completeness of the work through the words. Consider how Mariann DeKoven describes the complexity communicated by Stein in "Melanctha" through her repetition and particularity of language as "the beginning of Stein's journey into experimental writing":

the ordinary, simple vocabulary, even more reduced than in the earlier novellas, is often used so elastically, to cover so many meanings, and at the same time so indeterminately, that certain words become emblematic, invoking large, open-ended complexes of feeling and association, as well as meaning, each time they appear. These complexes of feeling, association, and meaning remain vague, inchoate; strongly felt by the reader but never clearly articulated by the narrator. (44)

Pointing to Stein's "complexes of feeling" conveyed by her narrator's repetitive word choice accurately captures Stein's project of writing directly, but to call these complexes of feeling "open-ended," and to suggest her "ordinary, simple vocabulary" is used "so indeterminately," unfairly characterizes the power of Stein's language as somehow vague and meandering, when in fact, I want to argue, Stein's simple vocabulary succeeds because of its precision.

Stein's narrators in *Three Lives*, and especially her narrator in "Melanctha," are far from simple-minded or barely illiterate. Rather, Stein uses their particularity of vocabulary, as simple as it is, to point to the way the human condition is often inexpressible by the limited vocabulary—or perhaps historical understanding of particular words—that are ascribed by the current milieu. As David Buckham understands it, Stein's narrative project fits on the modernist spectrum because she "is questioning the value of an omniscient, autotelic narrator who tells what is going on and who relates the meaning of what is going on"; but

Stein's particular innovation, perhaps, was to have a narrator who seems to be omniscient, who seems to be conventional, employing verbal structures that would be common to a mimetic emulation of a particular colloquial 'voice', but whose language works, through overemphasis of these structures, through the use of repetitive structures both at the level of diction and syntax, to undermine any sense of thematic synthesis or clear referential meaning. (Buckham 68)

Perhaps this is why some contemporary reviewers commented on Stein's use of dialect in "Melantha" and a prospective publishing house thought Stein was not a native English speaker. Stein's narrator "seems" to be a lot of things on the surface—conventional, colloquial, and, as DeKoven claimed, open-ended and indeterminate. But these interpretations of the narrative voice are undermined by the word choice itself, by the intentional repetition that opens up the text.

It is not, as Buckham suggests, thematic interpretation or meaning that are at stake, however; it is more than that. It is Stein's project as a whole to convey character by breaking apart classical understandings of human nature and habit and by resisting the rise of scientific discourse that began to replace those classical understandings. And that project, I want to argue, is certainly not undermined by her simple-vocabularied, straightforward-yet-repetitive narrator precisely because of the specific words Stein puts in that narrative voice. Repetition and word choice become central to this project and its successful conveyance.

Within Stein's narrative repetition of broad ideologically charged words—like "good" and "bad"—is also a focus on details, which enables Stein to tweak her emphases, move the story forward rather than become stagnant and muddled, and, what is most important, bring out the developing character of her central players of *Three Lives* more generally, and the "Melantha" story in particular. Stein maintains that she "has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and

outer reality” (*Toklas* 211). On the opening page of “The Good Anna,” for example, after announcing simply that “Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (3), the narrator describes the physical space of that 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.

An entire paragraph of detailed description such as this one stands out in *Three Lives* because it does rarely occur, and is perhaps the reason critics often overlook the power of these rare descriptions and the ways they alter our readings of Stein’s more simple and repetitive statements—in this case, the lead-in about Anna’s “arduous and troubled life.” Managing a house as precariously placed as “dominoes that a child knocks over” conveys a particular type of meaning, a tentative and anxious and unsecure meaning.

As the story continues, we are encouraged to agree twice more that Anna’s life is indeed arduous and troubled (5, 10)—a straight repetition without altering the order of the words. These repetitions, I am arguing, are not to be mathematically filed away into categories or unpacked and repacked with the precision of science, as some more logically minded explainers of the text tend to do; repetition is part of Stein’s careful project to subvert normal, recognizable language used to characterize and pull a story along.

In “Melanctha,” which is by far the most complex in terms of Stein’s repetitive project to emphasize the struggle of discourse to convey lived experience, Stein’s narrator still pauses to describe detailed moments of characterization, especially in using physical characteristics to convey inner traits and turmoil. Consider this early description in the story to set up the contrast between Melanctha and Rose:

Why did the subtle, intelligent, attractive, half white girl Melanctha Herbert love and do for and demean herself in service to this coarse, decent, sullen, ordinary, black childish Rose, and why was this unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless Rose married, and that's not so common either, to a good man of the negroes, while Melanctha with her white blood and attraction and her desire for a right position had not yet been really married? (60)

It is unlike Stein to pack adjectives together into a list as she does here, three times in a single sentence, but that compounding of details complicates the characterization of both women. Ulla Dydo comments on Stein's "reliance on minute details, including tiny inflections of language, to develop the evolving continuity of the present. Stein always insists on the importance of small things—an infinitude of tiny details rather than a collective totality" (95). The importance of these details to Stein's narrative project affirms the role particular words play in Stein's early fiction.

It would be unfair to leave out Stein's comments about the role of description in writing, especially if it seems to skew away from her background in science toward literature and other aesthetic pursuits. In fact, Stein attributes her process of learning about the importance of detailed description—"the complete description of everything"—to her work in the scientific laboratory of William James:

When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, and ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything. If this can really be done the complete description of everything then what else is there to do. We may well say nothing, but and this is the thing that makes everything continue to be anything, that after all what does happen is that as relatively few people spend all their time describing anything and they stop and so in the meantime as everything goes on somebody else can always commence and go on. And so description is really unending. (*Lectures* 156)

What Stein does with description in her work—pairing detailed description with repetitive word plays and the subversion of traditional word and narrative choices—

might rightly be called “the thing that makes everything continue to be anything.” And that thing, for Stein, began in the laboratory, though she did not leave it there.

As the building blocks of bigger narrative pieces to the seemingly repetitive puzzle that fits together into Stein’s stories, words become even more important. Even as early as 1951, in one of the first biographies of Gertrude Stein, Donald Sutherland notes the power of Stein’s narrative choice, suggesting that “Stein uses repetition and dislocation to make the word bear all the meaning it has” (48). Or, we might say, Stein enables words to bear all the meaning they don’t normally have at all: Stein loads more meaning into her words, sentences, and paragraphs by subverting conventional understandings of simple and common (and, often, value-laden) words.

Stein, ever the explainer, describes her project as one of insistence, not repetition, which are not the same thing:

And so let us think seriously of the difference between repetition and insistence.... [N]o matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different. It has to be, anybody can know that. It is very like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop. A bird’s singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence. That is the human expression saying the same thing and in insisting and we all insist varying the emphasising. (*Lectures*, 168)

Insistence suggests a variation of emphases; repetition is more of the same, an *ad nauseum* quality Stein’s stories never approach. Indeed, Stein is not just telling and retelling a story as she repeats particular words, or phrases, or even episodes within the narrative. Within one single story, like “Melanctha,” she uses repetition of words, phrases, and fragments of conversation combined with precise descriptions to do something more than just succeed in keeping something “alive in the telling.” In the introduction to Stein’s *Lectures in America*, Wendy Steiner describes Stein’s “insistence”

as “a sameness in difference” and “the inevitable mode of experience, the way essence manifests itself in time” (xx). Let’s connect this to Stein’s example of a hopping frog.

A frog “cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop,” Stein tells us. A common enough image, Stein need not quote a scientific study about amphibious behavior. When Stein repeats words with varying emphasis, varying insistence, she draws out the experience of the frog moving from stone to lily pad. Even if the frog leaps back to the stone, his wet footprints will land in a different place—both literally, on the stone itself, and metaphorically, in time, as his experience at one moment necessarily differs from the seemingly same experience at a different moment. Even in a nonrational creature like a frog, each experience as similar as it may seem necessarily differs in time: perhaps he is more or less hungry than the last time his webbed feet left their print here, perhaps the weather has changed, a predator came out of hiding, an insect appeared. It is not a stretch to see how more complex changes within a text’s narrative or a character’s experience within a story change the meaning of that moment of the story for the character as she experiences it in that moment. Or the way a reader recognizes the character’s experience in that moment.

Let’s take this one step further. The success of Steinian repetition, though, points less to the the motion of the frog, never landing in the same place twice, and more to the frog itself. Rather than the essence of a character’s experience, rather than the frog’s progress around the pond, Mellow suggests that Stein’s insistence might be offering readers more than just the characters’ experience but rather offering the actual characters: “So it was with Gertrude repetitive sentences, each one building up, phrase by phrase, the

substance of her characters” (Mellow 71). What could the “substance” of her characters be?

At the heart of Stein’s repetitive project, I want to claim, are her characters—not just their role as individuals within a larger story but the development of their character, their virtues and vices, the way they live and love in the world, and what it means to be a human being. These are the shades of meaning overlapping and overwhelming the English word “character” by the turn of the twentieth century. And character, as I’ve been establishing, is “the thing about men and women that is interesting.”

Though *Three Lives*, as Stein’s earliest published literary manuscript, remains one of the most linear and straightforward of her works of fiction, Stein’s use of repetition early in her career set it apart from her contemporaries at its publication in 1909.

“Melanctha: Each One as She May,” the longest of the three vignettes and the only one with a subtitle, was intended by Stein to be last in the manuscript. Set in an African American neighborhood in Baltimore, Stein uses repetition of words, sentences, ideas, and even key story events as a way to do something narratively.

But what is she doing? Clearly it is complicated, and unsurprisingly, the critics don’t agree. Is Stein using language, especially an intentional repetition-with-difference, to convey a complexity of experience, similar to but more highly refined than stream-of-consciousness? Or is Stein using language to point out the very failure of language to be able to convey the complexity of lived or subconscious experience? Yes and yes, depending on who is doing the reading. DeKoven calls Stein’s use of repetition “a complex, overdetermined phenomenon” in the text with the goal of mimesis: “it gives truer representation than standard writing of the raw process of consciousness” (41).

Perhaps Stein is trying to capture the constantly changing, contradictory chaos that is the interior mind of her nontraditional characters living in the world. Walker agrees that the repetitive words’ “patterning forcefully enacts the play of passions, the frustrating processes of thought and communication” even if “the simple words the characters use are shown to be slippery, unstable instruments” (38-39). David Buckham, however, considers Stein’s repetition to render her language and hence the narrative itself ambiguous (56), rather than a reflection of complicated lived experience or interior consciousness; and Janice Doane maintains similarly that the story of Melanctha “is Stein’s strongest indication of dissatisfaction with the inability of repetitive retelling to generate new knowledge” (77). But what if Stein *is* generating new knowledge, because in the telling of the story with insistence, it is “alive”? In the telling of the story, the frog doesn’t leap to the same lily pad twice, even if it is the same physical lily pad.

Perhaps Dydo’s explanation of Stein’s insistent words offers the best explanation for these varying and even divergent understandings: “precisely because [Stein’s] words are centripetal, pointing inward, to the piece, rather than centrifugal, pointing outward, to the world, readers find entry into her work difficult and look for help in a world that offers none” (23). Within the world of *Three Lives*, we know from Stein’s insistence and characterization that emotions are messy, that people are complex, and that lived experience is not always—and perhaps never—fair. Characters are developing character through inner and outer experiences as Stein insistently transforms conventional language into a subversion of discourse that defines “character” and maybe even human nature itself in new, radical ways. Stein is sifting the dirt out of muddy streams.

This radical use of language and its potential to transform the discussion of virtue outside and within the academy is conspicuously absent from Stein scholars who often, when they do discuss Stein's language, word choice, and radical writing, focus instead on its surface form. Because Stein's writing is so striking for its time, who can blame them? Janet Hobhouse, like other early biographers, glosses Stein's project in "Melanctha" and writes of "its use of dialogue, extraordinary in a work of that time for its closeness to actual speech. . . . Significantly it was ordinary human speech, repetitive and ungainly, unstructured by the demands of literary form" (71). Stein, as I have argued, was not capturing "actual speech," nor was she trying to "br[ing] the language back to life" as Sutherland says her work "more radically than any other work of the time in English" does (40). Rather, Stein says, perhaps coyly or smugly, she just did what "naturally to [her] was natural" ("Composition" 220).

What Stein did to words wasn't "natural"—or at the very least, it wasn't expected—but it was original. Similar to Sutherland's claim that "Stein uses repetition and dislocation to make the word bear all the meaning it has" (48), Allegra Stewart wrote in 1957 that Stein "strained words and exerted pressure upon them, and renounced 'names' (nouns), and dissected grammar. Whatever she concentrated her attention upon became isolated from all the relations in which it stood to other things" (Hoffman, *Critical* 99). The relations in which words stood to other things, even subconsciously, has become central to understanding Stein's theories of composition. These relationships are often called "associations," per the psychology of William James: "She follows William James in recognizing that words acquire meaning from the mind's stock of associations,

but she refuses to allow habitual patterns of association to obscure the multiple associative contexts of words” (Levin 154). Meyer puts it more strongly:

Stein objected to association . . . on two counts. First, it distracted from the writing by removing one’s attention from the object on the page and so breaking one’s concentration. Second, and still more damning, it was entirely habitual. One had no control over one’s associations—it was hardly possible to stop them—and as such they were a sign of one’s dependence on habit. (239-40)

Certainly Stein is indebted to the psychology of William James, as I have already conveyed and every biographer makes explicitly clear. Lisa Ruddick goes so far as to suggest that “‘Melanctha’ carries on a private conversation with William James. . . . Along one of its axes, Stein’s story reads as a tribute to James’s psychological theories—theories that despite their well-known continuities with modernist aesthetics are nineteenth-century in their ethics. Yet at the margins of the story, other material shows Stein already beginning to define herself against James” (12). Stein, I would like to argue, is doing more than “beginning to define herself against James,” however, though she certainly is, at the very least, doing so on some level. She is subverting the very discourse James’s academy taught, both the older classical understandings of virtue and aesthetics, as well as the scientific exploration of those virtues and natures and habits through laboratory experiments.

But “Gertrude Stein *is* hard work,” Dydo reminds us, “for she challenges our capacity to read and our expectations of what written words and sentences are, what they do and how they do it” (12, emphasis in original). It comes as no surprise to any close reader of her texts that the tendency of Stein scholars in recent decades focuses on her words themselves and the sounds of those words, the placement of those words, the

mechanics of her writing. Additionally, this trajectory is followed in linking her work to that of William James.

Most connections between Stein and James are on the level of subconscious, the role of habit formation, and automation. Jonathan Levin, who as his chapter title suggests is interested in “Gertrude Stein and the Movement of Words,” describes some of William James’s word experiments, especially the way a word can be emptied of meaning when repeated by itself—“it is reduced to a bare sensation” (151). Linking the writing of Stein, especially in works like “Melanctha,” to this sort of task of emptying words of meaning sells Stein’s genius and the vastness of her project short, though even her friend Carl Van Vechten suggested in 1914 that “She has really turned language into music, really made its sound more important than its sense” (Curnutt 155). Certainly Van Vechten’s description should unsettle casual readers of the text: has Stein made “sound more important than sense”?

Perhaps what is causing the confusion between the repetition of words and their potential loss of meaning is what Bowers calls the “slipperiness” of Stein’s words, like “good” or “wisdom” or “wandering” in “Melanctha” (Bowers 50-54). This slipperiness is related to her intentional style and the purpose of her work, as Levin describes well: “The continuous present which she seeks to represent is the dynamic moment of this renewal and transformation. Stein’s words are always in transition, foregrounding the processes that make and remake meanings” (154). A diversity of meaning, call it the slipperiness of words, call it ambiguity, is an intentional project of subversion and certainly does not make the words have *less* meaning but *more*. Stein, I argue, wants more than one

meaning to be present at the same moment; she wants conventional meanings to be stretched, not eliminated; broadened and subverted, not ignored.

What's more, according to Buckham, is that "[p]aradoxically, even when the narrator employs words and structures whose meaning would not ordinarily be interpreted as enigmatic, the meaning seems to become problematic" (65). Bowers's example of "good" and other words like "really" take on new meaning when we hear of someone, for instance, being "really" married. In the early 1900s, marriage was not something conventionally understood as being on a continuum of "real"-ness (though it would be fascinating to know Stein's take on the complex political and cultural moment in which we now find the discussion of "marriage" occurring and how if she were writing today she would subvert even those definitions being sought and established through legislation). In "Melanctha," simple words become loaded and difficult precisely in order to transform their simplicity into complexity that captures the way discourse has traditionally been limited and defined. This is no easy task, and Stein's success does not necessarily mean our interpretation comes without work. Buckham writes, "*Melanctha* is seemingly one of the most coherent and comprehensible texts of Stein's oeuvre, but is, beneath the surface, a text whose meaning is extremely ambiguous. . . . [I]t is impossible to discern any kind of autotelic meaning in *Melanctha* through the conventional, 'comfortable' methodology of searching for thematic synthesis in the text" (57). Certainly an "autotelic meaning" is difficult in any text, and Stein's proves more difficult than many, but a "thematic synthesis" is precisely what I am seeking to do here in regard to Stein's particular use of virtue language in "Melanctha."

In the following chapter, I will explore “Melanctha” in more detail, especially the way in which Stein uses the story to subvert classical understandings of virtue to demonstrate the complexity of human character, habit, desire, and behavior.

Chapter 4

The Whole Thing that Is Interesting:

“Melanctha,” Character, and Stein’s Subversion of Classical Virtue Theory

The composition we live in changes but essentially what happens does not change. We inside us do not change but our emphasis and the moment in which we live changes. That is it is never the same moment it is never the same emphasis at any successive moment of existing.

Gertrude Stein, *Lectures* 195

[A]t all times Miss Stein is a conscious artist; although her material may at first sight appear to be digressive or repetitive, she is actually presenting human beings in their uneventful daily lives according to a carefully wrought, fully developed conception.

Rosalind Miller, *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility* 46

The triangular love affair that occurred between Gertrude Stein, May Bookstaver, and Mabel Haynes has often been linked to the plot of “Melanctha,” and some scholars have found up to thirty-four parallels between the real and fictional stories (*Q.E.D.* 201). Indeed, “Melanctha” is considered by many to be at least the third time Stein has explored the same story line, rewriting, tweaking, and exploring the plot of a personal experience historians know to be factual. Nearly every biographer details the complicated truth behind the love triangle that appears in *Q.E.D.*, *Fernhurst*, and “Melanctha,” three of her earliest works, and point to the overlap of conversation snippets between the three stories and personal correspondence of Stein, Bookstaver, and Haynes. One important piece of the puzzle that connects these published works as well as Stein’s personal letters has been overlooked by scholars: the discussion of virtue and vice.

Why is this significant?

The two primary reasons have already been established in the previous two chapters: first, the “bottom nature,” or character, of human beings that fascinated Stein from the moment she observed it in James’ laboratory, and second, Stein’s academic

exposure to classical theories of philosophy while a philosophy major just before the turn of the century at Harvard. Closely connected to the discussion of character and human nature and habit is the central question of classical, especially ancient, philosophy: “What is ‘the good’?” A second question follows from the first: “What does it mean to be a ‘good person’?”

Stein’s exposure to these ideas in an academic setting that was beginning to grapple with the rise of psychology and physiology and scientific proofs alongside philosophical discussions of “the good” enabled her to explore what it means to develop character, habits, and virtue through lived experience and then articulate it through her fiction in a way that subverts both the classical understandings of fixed character and the scientific method of exploring what it means to be a human being, as if it were a thing to observe and catalog rather than experience.

First, we turn to the classical definitions of virtue and vice in an attempt to highlight the complexity—and success—of Stein’s project.

Though the earliest conceptions of virtue involved only the notion of excellence more generally, by the time of Plato and Aristotle, “virtue” was beginning to convey a moral dimension. For Aristotle, in particular, to speak of virtue was to speak of ethics, that is, moral habits. To be virtuous is, in this understanding, to have a disposition to do, think, and act a particular good way.

In Plato’s *Republic*, one of the few works in which he posits answers and definitions, Plato delineates the four virtues that have become known as the cardinal virtues of western culture: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. They are called “cardinal” virtues in that they “direct” all action. According to Plato, the soul is tripartite,

made up of reason, the appetites, and *thumos* (*thumos* is difficult to translate, but it is sometimes called the “spirited” part or the will). And these parts of the soul are intimately linked to the virtues: the first virtue, wisdom, is what is exhibited when the rational part of the soul is in good working order; the second, courage, appears when the person has a good *thumos*; temperance is the condition of having the right relationship between reason and the appetites; and justice is had when reason controls the appetites using the *thumos*.

Perhaps the most significant point about virtue for Plato that will be important in discussing Stein’s reinterpretation and subversion of virtue, character, and habit in “Melanctha” is that virtue is primarily intellectual: to *know* the good is to *do* the good.

Aristotle, primarily in *Nicomachean Ethics*, further articulates a conception of virtue focused on character and habituation. Like Plato’s conception of knowing the good being synonymous with doing the good, for Aristotle it would be ridiculous to conceive of a virtuous person not doing the virtuous act in any given situation; the difference from Plato simply comes that it is not a person’s intellect but their “firm, unshakeable character” and “practical wisdom” from which the virtuous action stems (*Nic. Eth.* bk. 2, ch. 4 and bk. 6, ch. 13). Later in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines *practical* wisdom as knowing how to apply virtue; the wise person cannot choose not to do the wise act. Additionally, if a person has practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, then it is necessary that such a person has all of the virtues.

A final Aristotelian description might be helpful for thinking about character types in “Melanctha.” For Aristotle, all people fall into one of four categories: vicious, incontinent, continent, or virtuous. The *vicious* person has no recognition what good actions (that is, virtuous actions) are and therefore cannot do those actions; the

incontinent person knows what the virtuous deed is but lacks practical wisdom and thus does not do the action; the *continent* person knows the virtuous action and generally does it, but doesn't want to and doesn't get pleasure from being virtuous; and the *virtuous* person knows the virtuous action, does it, wants to, and, what's more, likes it.

Taking character and classical virtue as two lenses—or a single, double-thick lens—through which to read and understand Stein's insistence on words like "wisdom" alters significantly our interpretation of the text. Perhaps because it is so often paired with "wandering," as in "wandering after wisdom," more often than not, in discussions of *Three Lives*, Melanctha's "wisdom" takes on a sexual, carnal, even illicit shade. Rather than analyzing "wisdom" within the text or from the point of view of Stein's potential subversion of what it means to be a "wise" person or act "wisely," discussions tend to be limited to the obvious euphemism for sexual awakening (see, for example, Bowers 38 or Mellow 74). To be fair, however, a few explore Stein's more complex thematic at play in her use of the word. John Carlos Rowe notes, "Stein gathers together in the term 'wandering' all the different affective, sexual, linguistic, and cognitive practices that cannot be controlled or understood by ruling-class reason" (233). And Lisa Ruddick points to another dimension of "wandering"—that the word is not "original" to Stein at all, pointing instead to Stein's indebtedness to modern psychology and to William James once again. James "uses the term *mind-wandering*, or *wandering attention*, to describe such a receptiveness to sensation" (Ruddick 18). These readings lead to interesting and even fruitful interpretations of the text, but, as we will see below, exploring Stein's "hazily defined wisdom" (Ruddick 32) in terms of its relation to classical understandings

of the four cardinal virtues has the potential to subvert those very virtues at the heart of western culture.

In discussing “Melanctha” in detail for a close reading, dividing the content into three sections can make it more manageable: the first section focuses on Melanctha’s own narrative, especially her upbringing and wandering, while the second section foregrounds Jeff’s narrative, as Stein moves us into his thoughts, feelings, and struggles in relating to and fighting against Melanctha. It is worth noting that the precise moment readers move into the mind of Jeff Campbell is not clear to us; Jeff and Melanctha have long, rambling conversations while Melanctha’s ill mother lays upstairs, and at some point the “power” shifts. Melanctha leaves the room, and we find ourselves alone with Jeff. In the third and final section of the story, as Lew Welch writes, “The story continues, but in my opinion it becomes less interesting” (49). Stein moves back to Melanctha’s narrative, in time for her tragic love affair and startlingly sudden death.

A simple “map” of “Melanctha” that can be traced along this same tripartite division of the narrative could easily be character-based: moving from Melanctha to Jeff and then back to Melanctha. Another division that maps onto the story as split into these three sections within the narrative could be based on virtue, moving from wisdom to courage and then to foolishness, commonly understood as the opposite of wisdom. But a more complex tripartite map of “Melanctha” should include all of these, as well as birth and death themes—the repetition of the birth of Rose’s child, for example, which is a moment of literal repetition in the text that sends a signal to readers to pay attention. If readers are perceptive to the virtue narrative, then the child’s birth and death emphasize the contrast between Melanctha’s wisdom in the first section and her lack of wisdom in

the third section. Indeed, the narrator tells us six times in five pages that love has made her “foolish” (155-59).

Presenting a case for the presence and prevalence of virtue—at least a thematics of virtue—in the narrative will set the stage for an analysis of Stein’s complex project of weaving together modern character types, human nature, and Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, which Stein powerfully subverts.

The first of the classical virtues that Stein offers to readers comes in the middle of a list of less-than-flattering personality traits: “The young Melanctha did not love her father and her mother, and she had a break neck courage, and a tongue that could be very nasty” (63). Without context, “courage” hardly seems admirable in this case. But as Melanctha’s childhood unfolds, courage as a virtue does emerge. Two sentences later, we read again, “Melanctha Herbert had always had a break neck courage” (63). Such a character trait comes in handy, for instance, when we learn that her “breakneck courage” helps her resist her father’s abuse (66).

Stein’s innovation comes when she splits “courage” apart in the story, separating out some sort of innate character description from a person’s actions in particular moments. As Melanctha seeks experience, we read, “She knew she was not getting what she so badly wanted, but with all her break neck courage Melanctha here was a coward” (68). While maintaining the centrality of courage to Melanctha’s character description, Stein describes her as a “coward,” that is, one with no courage. The important word in the sentence is “here,” however: “Melanctha *here* was a coward” (my emphasis). Courage—and virtue more generally—may be innate, as Melanctha’s is, but it can be lacking in

particular moments of action. Stein splits apart human nature and human action, which has significant implications for a more classical understanding of virtue.

A similar bifurcation occurs in Stein's presentation of wisdom in this first section: "Melanctha with all her inborn intense wisdom was really very ignorant of evil" (66). Conventional definitions tell us that a wise person cannot be ignorant, especially not of evil. Yet on the following page, Stein writes, "In these next years Melanctha learned many ways that lead to wisdom. She learned the ways, and dimly in the distance she saw wisdom" (67). If Melanctha had "inborn intense wisdom," how can it now be distanced from her, something she must learn? Stein continues to hint at the interplay of two types of wisdom, one a character trait and the other "world wisdom" (70). Melanctha, though wise, "wandered on the edge of wisdom" (70). As the plot of this first section moves forward, wisdom becomes something to be taught: Melanctha would soon meet Jane Harden, a "roughened woman," "who had wisdom" and also "vital courage" (73). The potential of virtue to be taught, like a skill, comes up again in the second section of the text, when Jeff seeks Melanctha's wisdom.

Something else early on in the first part of the story also helps to complicate the virtue thematic: "Melanctha always loved and wanted peace and gentleness and goodness and all her life for herself poor Melanctha could only find new ways to be in trouble" (65). A version of this sentence echoes throughout "Melanctha"; Stein uses the mantra to suggest something about Melanctha, but what is it? A close reading focusing on virtue might work through this in two different ways: firstly, that the disconnect between action and outcome is an example of "injustice" in the story (if so, this repeat construction is possibly the only identifiable appearance of (in)justice in "Melanctha"); or secondly, that

the disconnect between Melanctha's intentions and her actions—if “find[ing] new ways to be in trouble” is read as “action” on her part—illustrates a lack of virtue. Remember that the virtuous person according to Aristotle not only *knows* what the virtuous action is and *wants* to do it, but also *does* it and *enjoys* doing it. Regardless of the interpretation we choose—Stein leaves it ambiguous—the complexity of the role of virtue in a single sentence helps to show the complexity of virtue in the story as a whole and the way Stein is subverting what virtue is. In her narrative, living virtuously and being virtuous become a dichotomy.

In the first section of the story, Stein depicts courage as a double-sided virtue, but the section then moves beyond courage to thoroughly develop a thematic of wisdom; the second section starts with tension between fear and courage, as Jeff remembers how Melanctha accused him of being afraid of “losing being good” (87). Cowardice becomes the central image of the section, a refrain readers cannot ignore: “he did not want to be a coward” (91); “Somehow he was always afraid when he was to go to her, and yet he made himself very certain that here he would not be a coward” (95); “He knew he was very right to be angry, he knew he really had not been a coward” (102). But once again, Stein offers us clues that there are two types of cowardice, cowardice of character and cowardice of action. Jeff says to Melanctha, “*with you*, I have never been a coward. . . I don't like to be a coward *to you*, Melanctha” (103, my emphasis). His character remains solid (in a letter, Jeff writes, “I don't change, never” [104]), yet he confesses to inconsistencies of action: “Perhaps I was a coward” (107).

Additionally, Jeff and Melanctha's most strident verbal argument in this section is over a virtue: the distinction between courage and bravery (117-119). While Jeff doesn't

think it matters what a person's motivation is—if a man is on the bottom of a fist-pounding, it doesn't matter how he got there, he says—but Melanctha disagrees: “It do make all the difference the kind of way anybody is made to do things game” (119). Intention of action matters to Melanctha, and what is significant, at this point in the narrative, she is characterized as wise in both of Stein's senses of virtue—character and action.

Though Jeff's character “do[esn't] change, never,” he continues to seek Melanctha's wisdom in this section, asking her to tell him what to do: “Can't you help me to any way, to make it all straight for me, Melanctha, so I know right and real what it is I should be acting. You see, Melanctha, I don't want always to be a coward with you, if I only could know certain what was the right way for me to be acting” (112). She answers strongly, “No, Jeff, dear, I certainly can't help you” (113). This exchange will figure significantly in weaving Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of virtue being unteachable and unlearnable into the plot of “Melanctha.”

Eventually Jeff and Melanctha wander apart, and the third section of the story starts, it appears to the reader, with the re-introduction of Rose, with her “simple, selfish wisdom” (another complexity of virtue that seems dissonant with conventional definitions); but then the story backs up and mentions Jeff again briefly in order to reveal that “now Jeff Campbell had real wisdom in him” (154). But since the unlikable Jem Richards is also introduced to us as having “real wisdom” (154), Stein casts doubt on Jeff's being better off than before he met Melanctha. As the chart above illustrates, the primary virtue described in the third and final section of “Melanctha” is actually a vice: Melanctha's love has made her foolish (155-59).

As a narrative, “Melanctha” is front-loaded with discussions of virtue; once Stein establishes her *modus operandi*, she does not belabor the point. In the first section of the story, the most significant virtue themes for our discussion of Platonic and Aristotelian virtue is Stein’s introduction and of the dual nature of virtue—the difference between virtue as a character trait and virtue as action—and her conception of the potential to learn or teach virtue. This significant subversion of classical understanding of virtue questions millennia-old assumptions about the human experience and character. The second section of “Melanctha” further emphasizes the question of “learned” virtue as Jeff seeks “wisdom” from Melanctha and whether or not it is possible to learn to be wise. These threads will become central to our discussion of ancient virtue.

As has, I hope, been made clear thus far, Stein’s use of virtue language in “Melanctha” is significant and often enough that its presence can not be ignored. But how is it possible to offer a reading of “Melanctha” that incorporates language from the virtue tradition and makes claims about the ways Stein may or may not be intentionally adapting classical definitions for her purposes as a modern writer? Michael Trask, in “Making Do with Gertrude Stein,” suggests that formalist interpretations of Stein’s work have left little room for more thematic interpretations, such as the one I am seeking to do here. Trask writes,

critics have made it hard to accommodate the idea that Stein’s work might have interpretive value at the thematic level. Though able Stein critics have explored the connection between her work and James’s, for instance, they have viewed it largely in formal terms, nimbly positing how Jamesian habit is transformed into the arithmetic-like prose of Stein’s texts. [Specific themes] have thus proved hard to read in Stein; they don’t fit neatly into the abstractive calculus of most Stein criticism because they embody a sort of obdurate content, a sheer presence that doesn’t necessarily ‘mean’ anything. (90)

The question that haunts this research is whether the “sheer presence” of virtue in “Melantha” necessarily “means” anything. Is it possible to use the vocabulary already in existence from Plato and Aristotle to explore what Stein might be doing? I am arguing that yes, it is possible. And not just possible, but important in highlighting the radical nature of Stein’s subverting work on human character. Let’s consider how.

Regarding the struggle in the text between innate or habituated virtue and the possibility of “learning” to be virtuous: since virtue cannot be taught as far as the ancients were concerned, Stein’s determination to convey the process of gaining “wisdom” throughout the story—Melantha and Jeff seek it; Jane and Melantha teach it—could introduce some interesting conversations. One thing Stein succeeds in doing—possibly her most significant innovation on Platonic and Aristotelian virtue theory—is separating out the virtuous character trait from virtuous action. As a result, the already and innately wise Melantha can still wander after wisdom and the already courageous Melantha can be cowardly when faced with a difficult situation. This, of course, is impossible for both Plato (for whom to know good is to do good) and Aristotle (for whom to be virtuous is to act virtuously). Stein’s bifurcation of virtue into two parts—actions that may or may not correspond to character traits—not only subverts traditional understandings but requires follow-up questions that are, to some extent, unanswerable: what, then, does it mean to be a virtuous person? What, then, does it mean for an action to be virtuous? How can rightness and wrongness ever be established?

There is a fluidity to Stein’s articulation of virtue in “Melantha” that frees the potential of her characters, even as they seem stuck on a treadmill of struggle and confusion until their deaths. Significantly, Stein offers a subtitle to Melantha’s story,

something the other two “lives” of *Three Lives* don’t require. “Melantha: Each One As She May” would be a different story if Stein had called it “Melantha: Each One As She Is.” The word “may” is empowering, allowing room for growth or decline, based on the actions of “each one.” By separating out virtuous action from virtuous characters, Stein subverts how virtue has been defined and understood since Plato and Aristotle.

Aristotle’s “unity of the virtues” thesis establishes the impossibility of having one virtue, like practical wisdom, but lacking the others. The first and third sections of Stein’s story, that is, the parts that focus on Melantha’s development and then demise, are interesting to hold up and consider with this in mind. Melantha is described as having a sense of innate wisdom but lacking in world wisdom. Ignoring our inability to reconcile that bifurcation with Aristotle’s conception of virtue, fast-forward to the final section of the story, when Melantha falls in love with Jem, the villain who is also supposedly wise; her love makes her foolish, the narrator tells us over and over and over—six times to be exact. She is wise, seeks wisdom, teaches wisdom, and then dies a foolish woman. Is Melantha virtuous? The question, for Aristotle, would itself be nonsensical. Stein intentionally breaks away from any sort of unity-of-the-virtues arguments in order to present a more complex set of characters who are themselves in the process of developing character. Stein’s subversion of Aristotle’s theory introduces a powerful way of imagining and describing human nature that serves to break apart the heady academic discourse of classical virtue ethics, which remains in the theoretical realm, not the lived one.

Aristotle’s vicious-incontinent-continent-virtuous continuum may also offer insight into reading Stein’s work. Though Aristotle’s four types of people don’t directly

apply to “Melanctha,” thinking about these categories in terms of character types has potential here because, as we have seen, Stein herself thought in terms of character types; it was the recognition of the “bottom nature” of her experimental subjects that helped prompt her exploration of character, virtue, and habit as I’ve articulated it here. I am particularly interested in the character of Jeff during the second section of the story, especially at the moment he asks Melanctha to tell him what the right thing to do is (which is followed by her refusal). Aristotle’s vicious person, too, cannot discern what the virtuous action is. In fact, though it seems counter to the modern conception of right and wrong, in which ignorance often is thought to excuse bad behavior, Aristotle considers a vicious person to be the “worst” of the four types: such people are not even aware that they are doing wrong, which places them the furthest away from virtue. Jeff, though by the end reportedly has become wise, falls into this “vicious” category. Readers who disagree must, at the very least, confess that Jeff does lack practical wisdom, which puts him in the incontinent camp, only slightly “better” off than the vicious person. Since Jeff is most often conflated with Stein as an alter-ego of sorts, it is difficult to make sense of this shade of meaning. And though Jeff supposedly gains “real wisdom” (145) by the end of the narrative, only a few pages later readers learn that Jem, too, is described as having “real wisdom” (154) and Jem, we know, is not virtuous.

I’ve tried to show that many critics have described Stein’s deliberate use of language, of “breaking apart” grammar, sentences, and words, as a way of tearing down structures of perception and laying it all bare. While such criticism has its place, this is not always helpful and can, potentially, be limiting to our understanding of Stein’s larger project of subverting the discourse of virtue and vice, of character, of human nature.

What I am arguing is that rather than laying language “bare,” Stein is muddying the waters while, at the same time, allowing them to run clear as they continue on around the circular globe. Mabel Dodge, a friend of Stein’s, published an essay in 1913 ardently supporting Stein’s project. She writes of Stein’s work as “breaking” roads:

Many roads are being broken—what a wonderful word—‘broken’! And out of the shattering and petrification of today—up from the cleavage and the disintegration—we will see order emerging tomorrow. Is it so difficult to remember that life at birth is always painful and rarely lovely? How strange it is to think that the rough-hewn trail of today will become tomorrow the path of least resistance, over which the average will drift with all the ease and serenity of custom. . . . We can but praise the high courage of the road breakers. . . . (Hoffman, *Critical* 30-31)

Though hesitant to disagree with Dodge’s endorsement—we can’t miss her use of a virtue-laden word “courage” to describe the work that Stein has done as a “road breaker”—I would characterize Stein’s work through “Melanctha” more as repainting the lines on the road of virtue theory, or redrawing a map to a place that is already there, the “place” of human experience, rather than breaking the road into pieces for it to be rebuilt by somebody else. Certainly Stein “breaks” in a new style, but I am not convinced that she is doing much more than trying to capture human experience—the virtuous and the vicious—as she conceives it, witnesses it, experiences it, though that in itself is a monumental task. It is a task requiring the subversion of what is familiar, of the discourse that limits and shapes the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be virtuous, and, at the risk of sounding grander than need be, what it means to be human.

Stein is exposing the complexity of lived experience, and one of the ways she is doing that in “Melanctha” is by conversing in the language of classical virtue theory. But she’s not coloring between the lines, one could say, to introduce yet another metaphor to an already metaphoric topic. Stein’s understandings are more complex than the classical

definitions allow for; a whole paper could be written, I am sure, on how her life at the turn of the century and her exposure to the new scientific discourse within academic philosophy and psychology placed in her a particular milieu to rethink these conceptions of virtue and identity. In these pages, I have only begun to scratch the surface, articulating the differences between human nature and human action that I see Stein delineating in “Melanctha,” and the basis I find for these arguments in Stein’s education at Harvard, Stein’s specificity of word choice, and Stein’s theories about character and habit.

The virtuous person, for Stein, *can* act unvirtuously, as we have seen. Human beings are complex and inconsistent, as our lived experience has already taught us. The more interesting question to ponder, perhaps, is whether for Stein human beings can be anything *other* than inconsistent. To some extent, Stein has revealed, we are all the same: when it comes to human beings, “all that there [is] inside them, not so much by the actual words they [say] or the thoughts they [have] but the movement of their thoughts and words,” they are “endlessly the same and endlessly different” (*Lectures* 138).

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