GERTRUDE STEIN
A PRIMER FOR THE GRADUAL UNDERSTANDING OF GERTRUDE STEIN

GERTRUDE STEIN
A PRIMER FOR THE GRADUAL UNDERSTANDING OF GERTRUDE STEIN
GERTRUDE STEIN
A PRIMER FOR THE GRADUAL UNDERSTANDING OF GERTRUDE STEIN
GERTRUDE STEIN
A PRIMER FOR THE GRADUAL UNDERSTANDING OF GERTRUDE STEIN
GERTRUDE STEIN

Edited by

ROBERT BARTLETT HAAS

BLACK SPARROW PRESS · LOS ANGELES · 1973

have been put on a voice recorder, for no one can know Miss Stein without having sat with her and listened to her positive, almost masculine tone informed with an almost mocking note when it is not charged with an earnest seriousness. Now over 70, she is a woman of unusual mental vigor. To see her now makes one regret not having seen her in her prime."

There was something about it all that must have reminded Gertrude Stein of the 1891 Walt Whitman birthday interview in which the great, grey poet built his own legend, the stenographer discreetly hidden behind a screen. She inscribed the typescript as follows: "To Bobby Haas and his progeny forever. You got a scoop! Always, Gertrude Stein."

A TRANSATLANTIC INTERVIEW 1946

Sherwood Anderson wrote, "For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words." Is this an adequate summation of what you are trying to do?

It is and it isn't. The thing was not so simple as all that. In the beginning you must remember that I have always been from my babyhood a liberal reader of all English literature. In San Francisco they had a Mechanics Library. As it happened, it had an uncommonly good collection for an ordinary town, and they had a really marvelously complete Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century English Literature collection, and the early Nineteenth Century. And when I was a youngster I used to spend days and days reading things there, and that was my early contact. And then when I became a scientist and became a psychologist, I was only being a scientist for a while, but I did not really care for science. I then went to England and read Elizabethan plays extensively which were very rich in word value.

Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition. Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously, and it impressed me so much that I began to write *Three Lives* under this influence and this idea of composition and I was more interested in composition at that moment, this background of word-system, which had come to me from this reading that I had done. I was obsessed by this idea of composition, and the Negro story ("Melanctha" in *Three Lives*) was a quintessence of it.

You see I tried to convey the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole. It was the first time in any language that anyone had used that idea of composition in literature. Henry James had a slight inkling of it and was in some senses a forerunner, while in my case I made it stay on the page quite composed. You see he made it sort of like an atmosphere, and it was

not solely the realism of the characters but the realism of the composition which was the important thing, the realism of the composition of my thoughts.

After all, to me one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree. Because the realism of the people who did realism before was a realism of trying to make people real. I was not interested in making the people real but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value. One cannot live without the other. This was an entirely new idea and had been done a little by the Russians but had not been conceived as a reality until I came along, but I got it largely from Cézanne. Flaubert was there as a theme. He, too, had a little of the feeling about this thing, but they none of them conceived it as an entity, no more than any painter had done other than Cézanne. They all fell down on it, because the supremacy of one interest overcame them, while the Cézanne thing I put into words came in the *Three Lives* and was followed by the *Making of Americans*.

In the *Making of Americans* I began the same thing. In trying to make a history of the world my idea here was to write the life of every individual who could possibly live on the earth. I hoped to realize that ambition. My intention was to cover every possible variety of human type in it. I made endless diagrams of every human being, watching people from windows and so on until I could put down every type of human being that could be on the earth. I wanted each one to have the same value. I was not at all interested in the little or big men but to realize absolutely every variety of human experience that it was possible to have, every type, every style and nuance. I have always had this obsession, and that is why I enjoy talking to every GI. I must know every possible nuance.

Conception of this has to be based on a real feeling for every human being. The surprises of it are endless. Still there are the endless surprises, the combination that you don't expect, the relation of men to character that you do not expect. It never ends. All the time in it you see what I am singling out is that one thing has the same value as another. There are of course people who are more important than others in that they have more importance in the world, but this is not essential, and it ceases to be. I have no sense of difference in this respect, because every human being

comprises the combination form. Just as everybody has the vote, including the women, I think children should, because as soon as a child is conscious of itself, then it has to me an existence and has a stake in what happens. Everybody who has that stake has that quality of interest, and in the *Making of Americans* that is what I tried to show.

In writing the *Three Lives* I was not particularly conscious of the question of style. The style which everybody shouted about surprised me. I was only interested in these other things. In the beginning gradually I became more conscious of the way you did this thing and I became gradually more conscious of it and at that time particularly of a need for evenness. At this time I threw away punctuation. My real objection to it was that it threw away this balance that I was trying to get, this evenness of everybody having a vote, and that is the reason I am impatient with punctuation. Finally I got obsessed with these enormously long sentences and long paragraphs. All that was an effort to get this evenness, and this went on until it sort of exhausted itself.

On the *Making of Americans* I had written about one thousand pages, and I finished the thing with a sort of rhapsody at the end. Then I started in to write *Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein.* You will see in each one of these stories that they began in the character of *Making of Americans*, and then in about the middle of it words began to be for the first time more important than the sentence structure or the paragraphs. Something happened. I mean I felt a need. I had thought this thing out and felt a need of breaking it down and forcing it into little pieces. I felt that I had lost contact with the words in building up these Beethovian passages. I had lost that idea gained in my youth from the Seventeenth Century writers, and the little rhymes that used to run through my head from Shakespeare, who was always a passion, got lost from the overall pattern. I recognized and I recognize (if you look at the *Long Gay Book*) this something else I knew would guide that.

I began to play with words then. I was a little obsessed by words of equal value. Picasso was painting my portrait at that time, and he and I used to talk this thing over endlessly. At this time he had just begun on cubism. And I felt that the thing I got from Cézanne was not the last composition. You had to recognize words had lost their value in the Nineteenth Century, particularly towards the end, they had lost much of their variety, and I felt that

I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant and act within it.

Also the fact that as an American my mind was fresher towards language than the average English mind, as we had more or less renewed the word structure in our language. All through that middle period the interest was with that largely, ending up with *Tender Buttons*. In this I think that there are some of the best uses of words that there are. The movement is simple and holds by little words. I had at the same time a new interest in portraiture. I began then to want to make a more complete picture of each word, and that is when the portrait business started. I wait until each word can intimate some part of each little mannerism. In each one of them I was not satisfied until the whole thing formed, and it is very difficult to put it down, to explain, in words.

While during that middle period I had these two things that were working back to the compositional idea, the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them.

All these things interested me very strongly through the middle years from about after the *Making of Americans* until 1911, leading up to *Tender Buttons*, which was the apex of that. That was the culmination. Then came the war, and through the war I was traveling a great deal.

After the war the form of the thing, the question of the play form, began to interest me very much. I did very little work during the war. As soon as the war was over I settled down and wrote the whole of the *Geography and Plays*. That turned into very strong interest in play form, and then I began to be slowly impressed by the idea of narration.

After all, human beings are interested in two things. They are interested in the reality and interested in telling about it. I had struggled up to that time with the creation of reality, and then I became interested in how you could tell this thing in a way that anybody could understand and at the same time keep true to your values, and the thing bothered me a great deal at that time. I did

quite a few plays and portraits, and that ended roughly with the *Four Saints*, 1932. Most of the things that are in the *Useful Knowledge*, including a book of poetry which was not printed, were constant effort, and after that I was beginning the narration consisting in plays at first, ending with the *Four Saints*.

After the *Four Saints* the portrait narration began, and I went back to the form of narration, and at that time I had a certain reputation, no success, but a certain reputation, and I was asked to write a biography, and I said "No." And then as a joke I began to write the *Autobiography of Alice Toklas*, and at that moment I had made a rather interesting discovery. A young French poet had begun to write, and I was asked to translate his poems, and there I made a rather startling discovery that other people's words are quite different from one's own, and that they can not be the result of your internal troubles as a writer. They have a totally different sense than when they are your own words. This solved for me the problem of Shakespeare's sonnets, which are so unlike any of his other work. These may have been his own idea, undoubtedly they were, but the words have none of the violence that exists in any of the poems, in any of the plays. They have a roughness and violence in their juxtaposition which the sonnets do not have, and this brought me to a great deal of illumination of narrative, because most narrative is based not about your opinions but upon someone else's.

Therefore narrative has a different concept than poetry or even exposition, because, you see, the narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in somebody else's. Plays use it less, and so I did a tour de force with the *Autobiography of Alice Toklas*, and when I sent the first half to the agent, they sent back a telegram to see which one of us had written it! But still I had done what I saw, what you do in translation or in a narrative. I had recreated the point of view of somebody else. Therefore the words ran with a certain smoothness. Shakespeare never expressed any feelings of his own in those sonnets. They have too much smoothness. He did not feel "This is my emotion, I will write it down." If it is your own feeling, one's words have a fullness and violence.

Then I became more and more interested in the subject of narration, and my work since this, the bulk of my work since then, has been largely narration, and I had done children's stories. I think *Paris, France* and *Wars I have Seen* are the most successful of this. I thought I had done it in *Everybody's Autobiography*. I worked

very hard on that and was often very exhausted, but it is often confused and not clarified. But in *Wars I have Seen* and in *Paris, France,* to my feeling, I have done it more completely.

I have done the narration, because in narration your great problem is the problem of time in telling a story of anybody. And that is why newspaper people never become writers, because they have a false sense of time. They have to consider not the time in which to write but the time in which the newspaper is coming out. Three senses of time to struggle with, the time the event took place, the time they are writing, and the time it has to come out. Their sense of time can not be but false. Hemingway, on account of his newspaper training, has a false sense of time. One will sooner or later get this falsity of time, and that is why newspapers cannot be read later out of their published time.

I found out that in the essence of narration is this problem of time. You have as a person writing, and all the really great narration has it, you have to denude yourself of time so that writing time does not exist. If time exists, your writing is ephemeral. You can have a historical time, but for you the time does not exist, and if you are writing about the present, the time element must cease to exist. I did it unconsciously in the *Autobiography of Alice Toklas,* but I did it consciously in *Everybody's Autobiography* and in the last thing *Wars I have Seen.* In it I described something momentous happening under my eyes and I was able to do it without a great sense of time. There should not be a sense of time, but an existence suspended in time. That is really where I am at the present moment, I am still largely meditating about this sense of time.

Words hold an interest that you never lose, but usually at one moment one is more preoccupied with one thing than another, the parts mould into the whole. The narrative phase began in the middle thirties and has continued to the present time. Anderson was interested in the phase I was going through at the moment that he knew me. The thing that worried him the most was the narrative, and like other writers of that period he had not freed himself from the Nineteenth Century influence. He was sort of a cutout of the old into the new design. This is well illustrated in a little book he wrote about farmers.

Will you give an account of the results of your experimentation with writing since your lecture tour in the United States?

This has already been covered. There is one thing that impressed me a good many years ago. The characters in the novels of the Nineteenth Century lived a queer kind of way. That is to say people lived and died by these characters. They took a violent interest in them: the Dickens characters, the George Eliot characters, the Meredith characters. They were more real to the average human being than the people they knew. They were far more real, and they would discuss them and feel for them like people they knew. At the end of the Nineteenth Century that died out. Meredith was the last to produce characters who people felt were alive. In the characters of Henry James this is really very little true, the characters do not live very much. The ensemble lives, but nobody gets excited about the characters.

You see there really has been no real novel writing in that sense in the Twentieth Century. The most creative writings were western stories and detective stories, but these were not enough. The hero was usually a dead man in the beginning of the book, and the rest of it is largely a question of a system, one man's way of doing a thing or Scotland Yard's way. The individual that made the Nineteenth Century live practically does not live in the Twentieth Century, where the individual does not stick out enough for the people reading about him. Take Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, in all these it is the title and the form of the book that you remember rather than the characters in the book. That is the reason that the novel has not been a successful form of the Twentieth Century. Proust did it the best, but he made an old-fashioned thing of it. You take the average novel that is written in America today. No character sticks out, and no women's club gets all het up and excited about the character in the latest novel they read, or very little, surely.

You realize how they did in the Nineteenth Century. People really worried about and felt for these characters. Now, you see, even the cinema doesn't do it for them. A few actors or actresses do, but not the characters they portray. As long as the novel has existed, the characters were dominant. Can you imagine any one today weeping over a character? They get excited about the book

but not the character.

This has interested me very much. I think that is the reason why the novel as a form has not been successful in the Twentieth Century. That is why biographies have been more successful than novels. This is due in part to this enormous publicity business. The Duchess of Windsor was a more real person to the public and while the divorce was going on was a more actual person than anyone could create. In the Nineteenth Century no one was played up like that, like the Lindbergh kidnapping really roused people's feelings. Then Eleanor Roosevelt is an actuality more than any character in the Twentieth Century novel ever achieved.

To my mind the novel form has not been a successful affair in the Twentieth Century. There has been nothing that you can honestly call a novel. There has not been one in the Twentieth Century with the possible exception of Proust. That makes the novel scheme quite out of the question. One falls back on the thing like I did in *Ida,* where you try to handle a more or less satirical picture within the individual. No individual that you can conceive can hold their own beside life. There has been so much in recent years. Napoleon was, you might say, an ogre in his time. The common people did not know all the everyday things, did not know him intimately, there was not this enormous publicity. People now know the details of important people's daily life unlike they did in the Nineteenth Century. Then the novel supplied imagination where now you have it in publicity, and this changed the whole cast of the novel. So the novel is not a living form, and people try to get out of the difficulty by essay and short story form, and that is a feeble form at best.

The only serious effort that has been made is the detective story, and in a kind of a way Wallace is the only novelist of the Twentieth Century. He failed in the same way. He created an atmosphere of crime and did not have characters that people worried about. You cannot say that there is a novel of the Twentieth Century. I mean a more or less creative writer has never written anything that could in any reasonable sense of the word be called a novel. I have created a lot of characters, but that is another story.

Have there been any new developments in your attitude toward poetry?

Poetry is understandable, and the best poetry is real. The children's books and some of that in *Tender Buttons* and in some of the children's plays. There have been no new developments in poetry farther than that.

How and when are poetry and prose separate things?

I did that pretty thoroughly in that book of poetry and prose, and since then what poetry I have done has been in the children's books, and that you might call spontaneous poetry, and in *Paris, France* there is quite a bit of it, but that is mainly dealing with children. Somehow or other in war time the only thing that is spontaneously poetic is children. Children themselves are poetry. The poetry of adults in wartime is too intentional. It is too much mixed up with everything else. My poetry was children's poetry, and most of it is very good, and some of it as good as anything I have ever done. *The World is Round* is being included in a new American anthology.

The early book, Tender Buttons, *was written in Spain in 1913 and was Gertrude Stein's first attempt to "express the rhythm of the visible world."* Tender Buttons *was, therefore, to Gertrude Stein's development what the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" was to Picasso's, a key work marked with the enormous struggle of creating a new value.*

The following readings were chosen at random from Tender Buttons *and are followed by Gertrude Stein's verbatim responses.*

A DOG

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to
say that means to say that more sighs last goes.
Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

"A little monkey goes like a donkey . . . " That was an effort to illustrate the movement of a donkey going up a hill, you can see it plainly. "A little monkey goes like a donkey." An effort to make the movement of the donkey, and so the picture hangs complete.

A WHITE HUNTER

A white hunter is nearly crazy.

"A white hunter is nearly crazy." This is an abstract, I mean an abstraction of color. If a hunter is white he looks white, and that gives you a natural feeling that he is crazy, a complete portrait by suggestion, that is what I had in mind to write.

A LITTLE GIRL CALLED PAULINE (excerpt)

A little called anything shows shudders.
Come and say what prints all day. A whole few watermelon. There is no pope.
No cut in pennies and little dressing and choose wide soles and little spats really little spices.
A little lace makes boils. This is not true . . . .

"A little called anything shows shudders." This was another attempt to have only enough to describe the movement of one of those old-fashioned automobiles, an old Ford, the movement is like that automobile. This is an account of movement that is not always successful. For the most part it is successful and is rather interesting.

A LITTLE BIT OF A TUMBLER

A shining indication of yellow consists in there having been more of the same color than could have been expected when all four were bought. This was the hope which made the six and seven have no use for any more places and this necessarily spread into nothing. Spread into nothing.

I have used this idea in more places. I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a word relationship between the word and the things seen. "A shining indication of yellow . . . " suggests a tumbler and something in it. " . . . when all four were bought" suggests there were four of them. I try to call to the eye the way it appears by suggestion the way a painter can do it. This is difficult and takes a lot of work and concentration to do it. I want to indicate it without calling in other things. "This was the hope which made the six and seven have no use for any more places . . . " Places bring up a reality. " . . . and this necessarily spread into nothing," which does broken tumbler which is the end of the story.

painting w/ words

A WAIST

A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness.
Object that is in wood. Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the rush, make the bottom.
A piece of crystal. A change, in a change that is remarkable there is no reason to say that there was a time.
A woolen object gilded. A country climb is the best disgrace, a couple of practices any of them in order is so left.

"A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness." This was probably an effort to express an emotion, another version of an "Ode to a Mistress's Eyebrows." "Object that is in wood. Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the rush, make the bottom. A piece of crystal. A change, in a change that is remarkable there is no reason to say that there was a time." This is fairly successful of what I knew up to that date. I did not have to call in other things to help. I do not like to do this, there is so much one must reject to keep the even smoothness of suggestion.

A PIECE OF COFFEE

More of double.

A place in no new table.

A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color than altogether.

The sight of a reason, the same sight slighter, the sight of a simpler negative answer, the same sore sounder, the intention to wishing, the same splendor, the same furniture.

The time to show a message is when too late and later there is no hanging in a blight.

A not torn rose-wood color. If it is not dangerous then a pleasure and more than any other if it is cheap is not cheaper. The amusing side is that the sooner there are no fewer the more certain is the necessity dwindled. Supposing that the case contained rose-wood and a color. Supposing that there was no reason for a distress and more likely for a number, supposing that there was no astonishment, is it not necessary to mingle astonishment.

The settling of stationing cleaning is one way not to shatter scatter and scattering. The one way to use custom is to use soap and silk for cleaning. The one way to see cotton is to have a design concentrating the illusion and the illustration. The perfect way is to accustom the thing to have a lining and the shape of a ribbon and to be solid, quite solid in standing and to use heaviness in morning. It is light enough in that. It has that shape nicely. Very nicely may not be exaggerating. Very strongly may be sincerely fainting. May be strangely flattering. May not be strange in everything. May not be strange to.

"Dirty is yellow." Dirty has an association and is a word that I would not use now. I would not use words that have definite associations. This was earlier work and none of the later things have

this. This early work is not so successful. It is an effort and does not come clean. "The time to show a message is when too late and later there is no hanging in a blight." There is too much phantasy here. "A not torn rose-wood color. If it . . . is not necessary to mingle astonishment." That is the image but it is not completely successful, but it is better than the first part. You see there is too much appeal to the eye.

"The settling of stationing . . . May not be strange to." There is too much effort. If an effort that you make is successful, if you do get what you want to create, the effort must not show. It should create a satisfaction in the mind of the reader but in the same image as the creation. In this the mind is distracted and that is not satisfactory and it is therefore a failure. Here I am groping. I have not mastered my material. Insofar as creation is successful a reader realizes it as a successful entity, and in this you can see how successfully you have mastered your material.

A BROWN

A brown which is not liquid not more so is relaxed and yet there is a change, a news is pressing.

"A brown which is not liquid . . . " The color is held within and there you see I was groping for the color.

PEELED PENCIL, CHOKE

Rub her coke.

That is where I was beginning and went on a gool deal after that period to make sound pictures but I gave that up as uninteresting.

EGGS

Kind height, kind in the right stomach with a little sudden mill.

Cunning shawl, cunning shawl to be steady.

In white in white handkerchiefs with little dots in a white belt all shadows are singular they are singular and procured and relieved.

No that is not the cows shame and a precocious sound, it is a bite.

Cut up alone the paved way which is harm. Harm is old boat and a likely dash.

"In white in white handkerchiefs with little dots in a white belt all shadows are singular . . . " There I used a lot of imagery and from what I was interested in it is not a success. It should allow imagery with it without troubling anybody.

SUGAR (excerpts)

A violent luck and a whole sample and even then quiet.

Water is squeezing, water is almost squeezing on lard. Water, water is a mountain and it is selected and it is so practical that there is no use in money. A mind under is exact and so it is necessary to have a mouth and eye glasses.

A question of sudden rises and more time than awfulness is so easy and shady. There is precisely that noise . . .

Put it in the stew, put it to shame. A little slight shadow and a solid fine furnace.

The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful . .

A canoe is orderly. A period is solemn. A cow is accepted. . . .

This is rather fine, looking at it dispassionately. "A violent luck . . . There is precisely that noise." I call that from my standpoint a successful poem. " . . . slight shadow and a solid fine furnace." You see a "little slight shadow" has poetical appeal, but it is not quite successful poetry.

"Water is squeezing, water is almost squeezing on lard." The imagery of that is really a perfect example of realism, there is

enough there to a person looking at water that is realistic, there is enough use that is outside the image before your eyes. "A mind under is exact and so it is necessary to have a mouth and eyeglasses." That impresses any person, so to speak it is part of the water and is therefore valid. It is supposed to continue the actual realism of water, of a great body of water.

You must remember each time I took something, I said, I have got to satisfy each realistic thing I feel about it. Looking at your shoe, for instance, I would try to make a complete realistic picture of your shoe. It is devilish difficult and needs perfect concentration, you have to refuse so much and so much intrudes itself upon you that you do not want it, it is exhausting work.

MUTTONS (excerpts)

Mouse and mountain and a quiver, a quaint statue and pain in an exterior and silence more silence louder shows salmon a mischief intender . . . A sign is the specimen spoken.

A meal in mutton, mutton, why is lamb cheaper, it is cheaper because so little is more. Lecture, lecture and repeat instruction.

"Mouse and mountain and a quiver . . . " Here you see I was wise enough not to hesitate and still I dominated. " . . . A sign is the specimen spoken." You see also here you have a very good example. You take a paragraph like that and the values are pretty steady though this seems difficult to a normal reader's understanding. This is pretty good because it is more abstract.

You see it is the people who generally smell of the museums who are accepted, and it is the new who are not accepted. You have got to accept a complete difference. It is hard to accept that, it is much easier to have one hand in the past. That is why James Joyce was accepted and I was not. He leaned toward the past, in my work the newness and difference is fundamental. Cézanne was my great influence though I never met him; he was an ailing man at that time.

This book is interesting as there is as much failure as success in

it. When this was printed I did not understand this creation. I can see now, but one cannot understand a thing until it is done. With a thing in the process of doing, you do not know what you are doing until it is done, finished, and thus you cannot explain it. Until then you are struggling.

I was not interested in what people would think when they read this poetry; I was entirely taken up with my problem and if it did not tell my story it would tell some story. They might have another conception which would be their affair. It is not necessarily attached to the original idea I had when I wrote it.

Nobody enters into the mind of someone else, not even a husband and wife. You may touch, but you do not enter into each other's mind. Why should you? In a created thing it means more to the writer than it means to the reader. It can only mean something to one person and that person the one who wrote it.

What was the character of your first audience?

Well, Carl Van Vechten was the first person who published me, and Carl was a great believer in me from the very beginning. Then there was a group of young people in New York. I do not know what has become of them now. They were all friends of Carl Van Vechten. There was a man called Don Marquis, and he in the guise of making fun was very much interested in my work. Henry McBride said, "If you laugh with her you have more fun than laughing at her." Protestingly, he used pieces of my work in his paper. I was essentially a writer's writer. My audience in France, that was a perfect audience. The first person who ever printed anything of mine here was Jean Cocteau. That was in a book called *Potomac*, in 1913. He was the first one. He printed the *Portrait of Mabel Dodge*, which he heard read in a cafe. Then there was Edith Sitwell, who was my chief English contact. Harold Acton was another one. Then there was Bernard Fay, who printed a piece of *Melanctha*, and he lectured on my work a great deal at the Collège de France.

Will you trace for me something of the nature of the development of your acceptance?

I became fairly early in the game a writer's writer. Sherwood Anderson and people like that scattered all over the country were interested, and it gave them something to think about—Bromfield, Hemingway, Anderson, Wendell Wilcox—and it disseminated between one and another. When I was at a dinner party at Beverly Hills in Hollywood, there were a great many of the big vedettes of the cinema. After the dinner all these people were seated in front of me, and I did not know what it was all about or what they wanted, and finally one blurted out, "What we want to know is how do you get so much publicity?" So I told them, "By having such a small audience. Begin with a small audience. If that small audience really believes, they make a big noise, and a big audience does not make a noise at all."

What is your attitude toward lecturing?

Picasso and I were talking the other day. I always said I never minded living in France. I write with my eyes, not with my ears or mouth. I hate lecturing, because you begin to hear yourself talk, because sooner or later you hear your voice, and you do not hear what you say. You just hear what they hear you say. As a matter of fact, as a writer I write entirely with my eyes. The words as seen by my eyes are the important words, and the ears and mouth do not count. I said to Picasso, "When you were a kid you never looked at things." He seemed to swallow the things he saw but he never looked, and I said, "In recent years you have been looking, you see too much, it is a mistake for you." He said, "You are quite right." A writer should write with his eyes, and a painter paint with his ears. You should always paint knowledge which you have acquired, not by looking but by swallowing. I have always noticed that in portraits of really great writers the mouth is always firmly closed.

What about your relationship with Richard Wright?

Richard Wright I first encountered through his writings on my work. I was impressed by the quality of his writings. I think in the first place he has a great mastery of the English language, and I

think, to my mind, he has succeeded in doing the most creative work that has been done in many a year. His *Black Boy* is a very masterly novel, and every time he writes there is a form. He dominates his language. He holds it. *Uncle Tom's Children* has a piece of consummate description in the first of the story. I do not think there has been anything done like it since I wrote *Three Lives*. There has not been anything so good in the English language since. The others are merely followers. Richard Wright is not a follower. He does admire my writing thoroughly. He did a criticism of *Wars I Have Seen*. I saw it in a newspaper and was astounded by the quality of the writing and asked who he was and was given some of his books. He writes very wonderful letters. His meditations on the American scene are the most interesting I have heard from anybody. I think he is a very, very interesting person.

In Esquire, *July 1945, Sinclair Lewis wrote: " . . . When the exhibitionist deliberately makes his rites as confusing as possible, he is permitted to go on only because so many people are afraid to blurt out, 'I don't know what it means.' For that same reason, Gertrude Stein, the Mother Superior of all that shoddy magic, is still extensively admired even though she is also extensively unread."*

The best answer to that is what Picasso said, a perfectly good answer. In the first place this is my answer. The facts of the case are that all these people, including myself, are people with a considerably large endowment, and most of us spent thirty years of our life in being made fun of and laughed at and criticized and having no existence and being without a cent of income. The work needs concentration, and one is often exhausted by it. No one would do this merely for exhibitionism; there is too much bitterness. Picasso said, "You see, the situation is very simple. Anybody that creates a new thing has to make it ugly. The effort of creation is so great, that trying to get away from the other things, the contemporary insistence, is so great that the effort to break it gives the appearance of ugliness. Your followers can make it pretty, so generally followers are accepted before the master. The master has the stain of ugliness. The followers who make it pretty are accepted. The people then go back to the original. They see the beauty

and bring it back to the original."

Sinclair Lewis would never accept, for instance, that the GI is an entirely different creature from the Sammy of the last war. It would never occur to him to enter into things. He follows the journalistic form and is a newspaperman with a gift for writing books. I have been accused of repetition, but that is not so, and Sinclair Lewis is talking as they talked thirty years ago. The young man and the GI of today would never come to talk to me if I was an exhibitionist or a repetitionist, because time would have killed that. These do not last through time. The point is that the repetition is in Lewis; it is not in me. Lewis is saying what they said thirty years ago about *Tender Buttons*. Anderson also was protesting against it. You see the thing I mean is very well stated in *Composition*. I do not consider that any creative artist is anything but contemporary. Only he is sensitive to what is contemporary long before the average human being is. He puts down what is contemporary, and it is exactly that. Sooner or later people realize it.

I remember one day in the rue Raspail I was walking with Picasso. There came down the street a camouflaged truck, and he stood absolutely still and stared at it and said, "That is what you and I have been doing for years. What is the matter with these people?" He had known fifteen years before they knew that it was contemporary. Picasso said that no one is capable of understanding you who is not capable of doing the same work himself.

Why have you not explained more generally what you are attempting to do?

You explain it to anybody that asks, but if the asking desire is not there, the explanation is useless. You can explain when there is contact, and that person who has made contact can explain to others. It is in *Wars I Have Seen* and *Everybody's Autobiography*. But the thing you have to remember is that it is what these people like, and what Sinclair Lewis cannot understand is that it lives and is ageless.

He is the perfect example of the false sense of time of the newspaper world. He lives in the past and present and not the future. They have no time other than false time. He makes *Main Street* as if time were the main thing, which it isn't. He does not see that

Main Street is made up of clear accounts of things. He was always dominated by an artificial time when he wrote *Main Street.* After all, the average human being is selfish and as such is interesting, everybody is, and he gives a little character to it. All right, but that is a cliché. He did not create actual human beings at any time. That is what makes it newspaper. Sinclair Lewis is the typical newspaperman who writes novels as a newspaperman, and everything he says is newspaper. The difference between a thinker and a newspaperman is that a thinker enters right into things; a newspaperman is superficial.

When I was in America one day there were three young newspapermen and a photographer, and they had just come out of college and took themselvse very seriously, but eventually we got talking about things in general. The only one of the four of them who understood my writing was the photographer. He said, "I don't have to remember what you say. I am not involved with the mechanics of remembering it, and so I can understand it. They are too busy trying to remember what you say."

Why did you answer questionnaires like those in Little Review *and* transition *cryptically, with a chip on your shoulder?*

That does not interest me; it is like the Gallup Poll. After all, my only thought is a complicated simplicity. I like a thing simple, but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme; otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity. A great deal of this I owe to a great teacher, William James. He said, "Never reject anything. Nothing has been proved. If you reject anything, that is the beginning of the end as an intellectual." He was my big influence when I was at college. He was a man who always said, "Complicate your life as much as you please, it has got to simplify."

Nothing can be the same thing to the other person. Nobody can enter into anybody else's mind; so why try? One can only enter into it in a superficial way. You have slight contacts with other people's minds, but you cannot enter into them.

Then why did you publish manuscripts that were really written only for yourself?

There is the eternal vanity of the mind. One wants to see one's children in the world and have them admired like any fond parent, and it is a bitter blow to have them refused or mocked. It is just as bitter for me to have a thing refused as for any little writer with his first manuscript. Anything you create you want to exist, and its means of existence is in being printed.