The Continual Pilgrimage

American Writers in Paris,
1944–1960

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“Courage to Be Courageous”: The Last Works and Days of Gertrude Stein

“What a day is today that is what a day it was day before yesterday, what a day! I can tell everybody that none of you know what this native land business is until you have been cut off from that same native land completely for years. This native land business gets you all right.... I am so happy to be talking to America today so happy.” Thus spoke Gertrude Stein on September 4, 1944. The occasion was a transatlantic radio broadcast to the American people three days after the liberation of Culoz by the Allies.

Stein was indeed happy. The war years, during which she and Toklas had remained in southeast France, had been fraught with uncertainty, deprivation, anxiety. As Jews, as enemy aliens, they had lived constantly with the possibility of arrest and deportation to the camps. Now, nearly delirious with the arrival of the Americans, she could finally express how truly isolated she had felt. This is not to imply that she and Toklas had bemoaned their
wartime fate. Having chosen to stay in France—a decision made with considerable hesitation and anguish—they accepted the situation with equanimity. Stein later recorded how she and Toklas had decided to remain:

And then Italy came into the war and then I was scared, completely scared, and my stomach felt very weak, because—well, here we were right in everybody’s path; any enemy that wanted to go anywhere might easily come here. I was frightened; I woke up completely upset. And I said to Alice Toklas, “Let’s go away.” . . . And we telephoned to the American consul in Lyon and he said, “I’ll fix up your passports. Do not hesitate—leave.” . . . We went; it was a lovely day, the drive from Bourg to Lyon was heavenly. They all said, “Leave,” and I said to Alice Toklas, “Well, I don’t know—it would be awfully uncomfortable and I am fussy about my food. Let’s not leave.” So we came back, and the village [of Bilignin] was happy and we were happy and that was all right.

A few days later, however, they decided again to leave and made the trip to Lyon to renew their passports. But once more, they could not bear the thought of deserting France, where they had resided for more than thirty years. Their friends and neighbors affirmed their decision. One acquaintance in Belley was apparently most responsible for their choice. As Stein recorded it, he told her: “Everybody knows you here; everybody likes you; we all would help you in every way. Why risk yourself among strangers?” This settled the matter: “So back we came and we unpacked our spare gasoline and our bags and we said to Madame Roux, ‘Here we are and here we stay.’ ”

Stein was not idle during the war years. Although at first the time passed quite slowly, with the arrival of the Germans, Stein found herself observing closely small details of daily life: the sound of the cannon on the hillside, the refusal of a local garage keeper to furnish gasoline to the Germans, the anxiety of the
young men who feared being rounded up and sent to Germany. Incidents such as these formed the backdrop of three major works that she wrote during the Occupation: a novel, Mrs. Reynolds; a chronicle of her life during the war, Wars I Have Seen; and a play, Yes Is for a Very Young Man. Taken together, they reveal a great deal about Stein’s reactions and experiences under the stress of those years. But where Wars I Have Seen is a public record of public events, Mrs. Reynolds and to a lesser extent the play are accounts of the effect of war and occupation on the psyche. Of the three, Mrs. Reynolds, though far less straightforward than the other works, is the most powerful and compelling statement of life under the Germans.

The book tells the story of an American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, very reminiscent of Stein and Toklas, who are resident in occupied foreign territory during a war. The novel revolves around Mrs. Reynolds’s daily activities—walking, gardening, talking with friends, ruminating on history and books of prophecy, sleeping, sighing, weeping—during what seems an interminable period of war. An additional central but unseen character is Angel Harper, a version of Hitler. He was a local boy, and his odd youth and rise to power are major topics of conversation among the villagers in the first half of the novel; in the second half, through frequent and obsessive mentions of his age, he functions on the periphery as an indicator of passing time. Stalin is also present in a minor role, in the rather undeveloped figure of Joseph Lane.

Written between 1940 and 1943, Mrs. Reynolds is really a novel about endurance amid total uncertainty. In a brief epilogue to the book Stein defined it as “an effort to show the way anybody could feel these years. . . . There is nothing historical about this book except the state of mind.” The description is apt, for while Mrs. Reynolds has several conflicting emotions, she has one state of mind, one mission: to survive intact. “It takes courage to be courageous,” she announces in the book’s opening line. The rest of the novel is an articulation of what this means in terms of “a perfectly ordinary couple living an ordinary life.” As such, the
book is constructed around small, occasionally ominous but more often mundane incidents, all of which contribute to creating a psychologically resonant portrait of despair. Mrs. Reynolds seeks refuge in a variety of ways—through memory, gossip, and belief in medieval prophecy, through her relationship with Mr. Reynolds, through frequent sighs and outbreaks of tears, through sleep—but none really satisfactorily effaces the daily anxiety. Her heroism, her courage, consists in not ultimately succumbing; it is a small-scale triumph, but a victory nonetheless.

_Wars I Have Seen_ presents much of the same terrain, but through a somewhat different lens. Begun while Stein was still writing _Mrs. Reynolds_, it is written from the viewpoint of the intelligence, not of the psyche. Again, observed details of quotidian existence, often paralleling events in _Mrs. Reynolds_, are set next to broader meditations on war, humanity, politics, society, and history. The overall impression, though, is of Stein as a rational, tough-minded, fully engaged human being. It is really only at the end of the book, when the American army finally arrives, that emotion is allowed to enter the narrative. Even when she is evicted in 1943 from her house in Bilignin, where she and Toklas had resided since 1929, and forced to move to the nearby town of Culoz, or when she is made to house German and Italian soldiers in her new residence, she stoically accepts these intrusions into her personal life.

Stein's politics were always conservative. She was an ardent defender of the Falangists in Spain, and in _Wars I Have Seen_ she extends her support of conservative values to Marshal Pétain; he was "right to make the armistice," she says, and sees in it not capitulation but "an important element in the ultimate defeat of the Germans." Although she does not mention it in the book, she so believed Pétain had been right that she even translated a volume of his speeches in the early years of the war. Her hope was that she might be able to help Americans understand better what was widely perceived in the United States as his surrender of France to the enemy. But after getting negative reaction from friends in the States, she quietly abandoned the project.
To comprehend Stein's embrace of the Vichy doctrine it is necessary to view it within the greater perspective of her outlook on the war. She believed, at least initially, that by signing the armistice with the Nazis, Pétain had managed to save thousands of French lives: a perception not all that uncommon at the time. On a more personal level, Stein believed that Pétain's action, which nominally left the Vichy government in control of a large portion of France, prevented its occupation by German troops. "We who lived in the unoccupied we knew there was a difference all right. One might not be very free in the unoccupied but we were pretty free and in the occupied they were not free, the difference between being pretty free and not free at all is considerable." It was the case, as a severe critic of her position, her longtime friend W. G. Rogers wrote, that "if I had believed that Pétain helped to save my neck, I too might seek to exculpate him from the more flagrant charges of collaboration."

Despite her early admiration of Pétain, as the war continued she began to give less credence to the Maréchal: "So many points of view about him, so very many, I had lots of them, I was almost French in having so many." By 1943, in fact, her attitude had undergone a considerable transformation when it became clear that the Germans were indeed beginning to occupy the "unoccupied" zone. As a result, she began to write glowingly of the maquis. The abrupt switch in allegiance was fairly typical of many in the Vichy sector; to some extent Stein's sentiments were those of her adopted countrymen, determined more by personal circumstances than by ideology.

In *Yes Is for a Very Young Man*, Stein addresses the variety and complexity of individual responses felt by the French during the Occupation. Or as she wrote to the English painter Francis Rose: "Living in an occupied country is very complicated and that is what I have tried to make people understand in my play *Yes is for a very young man*." No better synopsis of the play exists. Although flawed as drama, as a statement on France during the Occupation, *Yes* is enormously insightful. The central concern is the moral dilemma—to whom do one's loyalties belong?—that an
occupied people face; in a more personal sense, it was Stein's way of attempting to sort out her own conflicting emotions as the war dragged on.

The play opens in 1940, just after the armistice has been signed, and ends with the liberation of Paris. It is a drama of ideas, its tensions created through the juxtaposition of small but key events that bring the characters to reveal their feelings about the war and especially the Occupation, then express those feelings through actions. The central characters are Denise, a reactionary Frenchwoman; her bewildered husband, Henry, who eventually participates in actions of the maquis after his father is killed by the Germans; Henry's brother, Ferdinand, the "young man" of the title, who is sent as a forced laborer to work in factories in Germany; and Constance, an American woman who, after choosing to stay in France, joins the Resistance. All of these personages, though, are aspects of the one major character in the play: France itself, "a country that can be beaten but not conquered, that can be a phoenix and rise from the ashes."

As in Mrs. Reynolds, many of the actual incidents are drawn from life, and a good portion of the dialogue is taken directly from Wars I Have Seen. Ferdinand, for instance, is based on an acquaintance, Francis Malherbe, whose description in Stein's nonfictional account of the conditions in Germany is quoted nearly verbatim in Yes Is for a Very Young Man. Constance is persuaded to stay in the village by a neighbor, as was Stein. Troops are billeted in her house and her servants have the same names as Stein's servants. What makes the play remarkable is Stein's ability to create a vivid sense of life under the Germans without ever resorting to praise of one action or condemnation of another. Perceptive of detail, she manages to present, as she had hoped, "the divided families, the bitterness, the quarrels and sometimes the denunciations, and yet the natural necessity of their all continuing to live their daily life together, because after all that was all the life they had, besides they were after all the same family or neighbors, and in the country neighbors are neighbors."

Perhaps because it is a play about the "neighbors" of whom
Stein had such an acute awareness and admiration, there is no real hero in the drama, but no true villain either. Everyone’s position, as Stein sees it, is worthy of sympathy and requires understanding. This includes even the ultrarightist Denise, with her pro-German pronouncements. The underlying situation for Stein is that, as Ferdinand says near the beginning of the play, “every Frenchman in France is in prison, but you can’t take sides in prison.”

Given Stein’s obvious ability to perceive the intricate human questions regarding the war, it is surprising that she seems never to have comprehended fully the Holocaust. Indeed, on her own Jewishness and on anti-Semitism in general, Stein’s perspective was not so different from that held by a number of Jews in the early days of the war, who, having identified themselves as Frenchmen first, Jews second, were tragically duped into thinking that their own attitudes would somehow prevail over the rabid tide of anti-Semitic persecution sweeping France. Stein notes at one point in Wars I Have Seen that although her lawyer advised her and Toklas to flee immediately, lest they be shipped off to the camps, her reaction was not fear but disbelief, almost as if she did not regard herself and Toklas as Jews: “I felt very funny, quite completely funny.”

After she and Toklas discussed the matter, they decided to remain. “What was so curious in the whole affair,” commented Stein, “was its unreality.” Although she never denied being Jewish, she seems to have felt that as a nonpracticing Jew she was exempt from the concerted campaign to deport all Jews.

To some extent this was simply naïveté, but there is also reason to believe that Stein felt protected from deportation by her friend and French translator, Bernard Fay, who as an official in the Vichy government interceded on her behalf with Pétain. Fay at least later claimed this to be the case, and it is quite likely that Stein wanted to think it was so. More immediately responsible for her well-being, however, was the mayor of Culoz; well aware of Stein’s status as a Jew and a foreigner, he nonetheless refused to
denounce her, "forgetting" to mention Stein and Toklas when the Nazis were rounding up enemy aliens. "You are obviously too old for life in a concentration camp," he simply told her. "You would not survive it, so why should I tell them?"

Stein's refusal to categorize herself as a Jew is perhaps responsible for what can be described only as a tendency toward anti-Semitism. When elsewhere in *Wars I Have Seen* she discusses the issue, she proffers a thesis that verges on blaming the Jews for the problem:

Before industrialism Jews were international bankers and before that international money lenders, but since industrialism, all the Jewish money in the world is only a drop in the bucket.... But the European particularly the countries who like to delude their people do not want to know it, they must know it of course, anybody must know it, and the Jews do not want anybody to know it, although they know it perfectly well they must know it because it would make themselves to themselves feel less important and as they always as the chosen people have felt themselves to themselves to be important they do not want anybody to know it.

Even after learning of the horror of the camps, she did not alter her opinion. In a letter to Robert Graves written in 1946, she was even more direct in her assessment that Jews were responsible, at least to some degree, for anti-Semitism. Commenting on a former acquaintance, she wrote:

She was the materialistic jew camouflaging her materialism by intellectualism, a very common thing in the race, I cannot say camouflaging, really the intellectualism is the reactionary violence of their materialism, in the Jewish race there are really more jews like that than any other kind, I guess it is Semitic that, and it is they that make all the noise and really keep alive Anti-semitism.

Stein's position vis-à-vis her fellow Jews had much less to do with her philosophy of religion, which stemmed from her
embrace as an undergraduate at Radcliffe of the work of William James, than with her concept of character, developed in large part from her reading of Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*. Her enthusiasm for the book, published in English translation in 1906 and read by Stein in 1908, was curious, to say the least, for *Sex and Character* is both virulently anti-Semitic and misogynistic. Stein, however, had the ability to take only what she wanted from people, philosophy, and literature, and ignore what didn’t correspond to her own similar (and often preconceived) set of ideas. What appealed to her most was Weininger’s “characterology,” which attempted to reduce matters such as genius and talent, homosexuality, and relationships between the sexes to a schema involving the intrinsic nature of human beings. She was able to overlook his statements that women, because of their nature, could never be geniuses, and concentrate instead on his pronouncements that the lesbian, because she is “half male,” is more predisposed toward achievement.

She apparently adopted a similar point of view on Weininger’s anti-Semitic remarks, of which his book is replete. In particular, she appropriated his concept of “genuine” Jews, who like women are incapable of genius, as opposed to Jews in name only. It was always the “genuine” Jew, to use Weininger’s classification, who was the target of her blasts. According to her friend Virgil Thomson, Stein’s “anti-Semitism” was largely an abstraction, more a result of her penchant for grand likes and dislikes than any sort of codified position. As Thomson noted, her many individual relationships with Jews were marked by a high degree of familial intimacy:

Just as Gertrude kept up friendships among the Amazons, though she did not share their lives, she held certain Jews in attachment for their family-like warmth, though she felt no solidarity with Jewry. Tristan Tzara . . . she said was “like a cousin.” Miss Etta and Dr. Claribel Cone, picture buyers and friends from Baltimore days, she handled almost as if they were her sisters. The sculptors Jo Davidson and Jacques Lipschitz, the painter Man Ray she accepted as though they had a second
cousin’s right to be part of her life. About men or goyim, even about her oldest man friend, Picasso, she could feel unsure; but a woman or a Jew she could size up quickly. She accepted without cavil, indeed, all the conditionings of her Jewish background. And if, as she would boast, she was a “bad Jew,” she at least did not think of herself as a Christian.

Ultimately, it is this ability to identify herself as a “bad Jew” or a Jew “in name only” that most significantly affected her position during the Occupation; this explains in part her being able to live under the thumb of the German army without undo concern about her and Toklas’s personal safety. Not believing herself or Toklas to be Jews like “most Jews,” she did not regard the threat of deportation with much seriousness. Thanks to the concern of others, however, her strategy, if it can be called that, paid off. Many, such as her old friend the poet Max Jacob, were not so lucky. Despite his conversion to Catholicism years before the war, he was arrested and deported from Paris, and died in a concentration camp.

In identifying herself as an American, however, Stein never wavered, although she had lived more of her life in France than in the United States. Indeed, her jubilation at the arrival of American troops and her subsequent embrace of the GIs bordered on the chauvinistic. In the last pages of Wars I Have Seen she recorded how ecstatic she was upon coming across the first Americans while on a shopping trip to Belley with Toklas: “We held each other’s hands and we patted each other and we sat down together. . . . In the last war we had come across our first American soldiers and it had been nice but nothing like this, after almost two years of not a word with America.”

From this encounter until her death nearly two years later, Stein would be surrounded by American GIs and correspondents. Courting them, and being courted by them, she enthusiastically welcomed practically all Americans into her home, delighting in their speech, regional accents, tales of childhood, of
life on farms, in towns, in cities. In a curious way, she achieved fame upon the Liberation that she had never enjoyed before. *Life* magazine sent a cameraman to photograph "America's most famous literary expatriate." She broadcast to America on the radio, traveled to Germany on assignment for *Life* to write a story on servicemen there, wrote a companion piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, was interviewed by French, American, and British newspapers. Cries of "Hiya, Gertie" burst from the mouths of young American soldiers as she walked through the streets. Others swarmed around her asking for autographs. *Wars I Have Seen*, welcomed with rave reviews, became an overnight bestseller and sensation upon its publication in 1945; it was by far the most popular success she'd ever had in the United States. In short, Stein became a literary celebrity, a heroine of the war, a champion of America and Americans.

In September 1939, soon after Hitler invaded Poland, Stein and Toklas removed their personal belongings from their Paris apartment at 5 Rue Christine. Of their fabulous collection of paintings they took only two: Cézanne's *Portrait of Hortense* and a Picasso portrait of Stein. They did not return to Paris during the entire Occupation and were unaware of how their belongings had fared under the Germans. Now, at liberation, they were eager to return to the capital. The urgency became even greater when, in November 1944, they received a letter from an American friend, Katherine Dudley, who had remained in the city during the war. The letter contained reassuring but at the same time alarming news. "It's a miracle," wrote Dudley, "that your collection is still there for about 2 weeks before the Boches left 4 men of the Gestapo came, demanded the key of your concierge who protested in vain that you were American." Dudley went on to inform them that their downstairs neighbor, hearing footsteps overhead, rushed upstairs to witness the Gestapo "lashing themselves into a fury over the Picassos saying that they would cut them to pieces and burn them. 'De la saloperie juive, bon à brûler.'” Finally
forced out of the apartment, the neighbor called the police, who eventually evicted the Germans on the grounds that they did not have an order of perquisition to enter and confiscate personal possessions.

When Stein and Toklas finally did return to their apartment in mid-December 1944, they took inventory at once. A few items were missing—a footstool covered with a petit point that Toklas had worked from a Picasso drawing, and other small objects—but the collection was intact. Had it not been for the quick intervention on the part of their neighbor, major work would undoubtedly have been lost. A bundle of paintings, already tied up, leaned ominously against a wall.

Stein and Toklas had been back only a few hours when their first visitor arrived: Picasso. They embraced one another, rejoicing that “the treasures of [their] youth, the pictures, the drawings, were safe.” From Culoz, Stein and Toklas had brought a Henry IV table; when Picasso expressed his admiration for the design and workmanship, they gave it to him, assuring him it wouldn’t fit in their apartment.

Over the next few days others arrived, among them fellow expatriates Sylvia Beach and Katherine Dudley, both of whom had weathered the Occupation in France. Hemingway came too, and although he and Stein had quarreled long before, this reunion was wholly amicable, with the two avowing that they loved one another.

But the majority of those who rang the doorbell were in uniform. Officers and enlisted men, young and not so young, they flocked to the Rue Christine eager for an audience. Without exception, Stein welcomed them. “Paris is so lovely the American army is delightful I like them so much, and it is all every day just that way,” she wrote to a friend in the States. The GIs, overwhelmed by her warmth and her interest in them, quickly fell into the pattern of so many of their predecessors. They showed her poems written on the battlefield, expressed to her their dreams, their anxieties, their homesickness. A few, including writers Donald Sutherland and Joseph Barry, and Donald Gallup,
eventually curator of the American Literature Collection at Yale’s Beinecke Library, would contribute substantially to forwarding Stein’s reputation; but at the time they were simply young, anonymous servicemen, awed at having made contact with a great American writer.

Stein also became involved again in promoting the arts. In a gallery announcement for a young Spanish painter resident in Paris, Riba-Rovira, she prefaced her remarks by describing her search for new talent and noting that after having spent so many years in the countryside she was in need of discovering a young painter. “Paris was wonderful, but where was the young painter? I looked everywhere, in gallery after gallery, but the young painter did not exist.” Finally she discovered Riba-Rovira, and now consequently felt her return to Paris was complete. She also took up the cudgel for “a very interesting young painter,” Jean Atlan. Equally enthralled with the fashions being created by a then unknown designer, Pierre Balmain, she did much to advance his early career by writing a glowing article on him for Vogue.

But it was not just new painters and designers who interested her. As before the war, she renewed her championing of the work of Francis Rose, even acting as something of an agent for him. In a number of letters written to Rose, still resident in London, she gave a detailed accounting of how many pictures of his she had sold, and told him she awaited his orders about what to do with the money. By April 1946, she had earned the artist 158,555 francs, about $800.

Another old friend, Bernard Faï, also received her support. Arrested as a collaborator, he was eventually sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. Stein was appalled. “About Bernard Faï, no indeed he never worked against the free French, he was waiting with the greatest excitement the arrival of the Americans and the British, he helped many of the Resistance as well as the Jews, there is no doubt about that.” She wrote to him regularly, sent him candy and vitamin pills, even shipped him strictly rationed cigarettes when she learned that he could use them as currency within the prison.
Despite her delight at being back in Paris—"we had so much concentrated country for four years that we do like the life of the city"—daily life in the capital was more complicated than before the war, for Stein and Toklas were not spared the problem of basic commodities shortages. Stein, though, put a good face on it: "It is a happy time in a kind of a way when we can be pleased to have anything, when I think of the old days when we were fussy about the brand of coffee, or the choice of butter, or the cut of meat, it is now as it used to be for the children, you take what you get and be thankful." She also appealed to friends abroad for small items impossible to obtain in Paris: "Could you send us some TEK toothbrushes and toothpaste we need them."

Stein was, as well, ingenious about obtaining precious commodities. A young GI, Leon Gordon Miller, recounted how he had one day accompanied her to a butcher shop, where the customary long queue had formed. But instead of standing in line, she walked directly to the counter, heedless of the loud protests issuing from others waiting patiently. Suddenly the butcher, in an attempt to calm the crowd, shouted, "Elle est écrivain," then took her order. Emerging from the shop, Stein admonished Miller, who had beaten a retreat. In France, she told him, creative people were granted special privileges, as they had "less time to spare on routine."

She could not, however, use her status as a writer to influence the electric company. She and Toklas suffered as much as other Parisians during the extremely frigid winter of 1944–1945, shutting off all but two rooms in their apartment to conserve heat. Yet the excitement at being back in Paris took precedence over the lack of conveniences. "Alice having been raised in a temperate climate California finds it cold well it is cold, but when the electricity goes it is not so cold, but it does not always go, no it doesn't but we are so happy to be here, I walk and walk around and see it all."

Walking in Paris, however, was not the same experience as it had been before the war. Virgil Thomson recalled that Stein used these outings to meet the GIs who swarmed through the streets of
Paris: “Every day, as she walked her dog, she picked up dozens, asked them questions, took them home, fed them cake and whiskey, observed their language.” Listening to the young soldiers became a major activity. So enthralled was she with their speech and their preoccupations that she set about to record the GI legend for posterity. The result was a short novel, *Brewsie and Willie*.

The book consists essentially of dialogues among GIs. Brewsie is the philosopher in the group; Willie, loudmouthed, dominant, and sarcastic, is representative of what Stein at least took to be the common man. Other figures, nurses and fellow GIs, move in and out of the conversations, put forth their views as the need arises. Donald Sutherland, who wrote the first substantial book on Stein, noted perceptively that the book is really a series of twentieth-century Platonic dialogues in which ideas hold center stage; the characters exist only as vehicles for debating the central concerns of the time. He also makes a strong case for the accuracy of Stein’s ear:

> While the GI legend was really on, in Paris, it was as *Brewsie and Willie* describes it. . . . The legend was not a discipline or code or a dream of heroism, it was not at all rigid and it certainly allowed for the creation of individual legends or “characters” or variations within the range of the key signature, but that key was not determined by any individual personality, it was set by the group which was American and of the time. The book is a kind of quartet or sextet composed exactly in that key. At least it sounds exact to me, and I was in and out of Paris and Germany at the time, being as GI as possible.

Despite the charm of the book, its message was really quite subversive. Through her primary spokesman, Brewsie, Stein launched a spirited attack on what she perceived as the true enemy of America: industrialism. In harangue after harangue, Brewsie denounces the loss of the “pioneering” spirit, which has been replaced by the corrosive trend toward industrial enslaved-
ment: “Industrialism . . . produces more than anybody can buy and makes employees out of free men makes ’em stop thinking, stop feeling, makes ’em feel all alike.” In the afterword, “To Americans,” in an ardent tone reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s Rome broadcasts (for which he was charged with treason), Stein addressed her readers directly:

I am sure that this particular moment in our history is more important than anything since the Civil War. We are there where we have to have to fight a spiritual pioneer fight or we will go poor as England and other industrial countries have gone poor, and don’t think that communism or socialism will save you . . . you have to find out how you can go ahead without running away with yourselves, you have to learn to produce without exhausting your country’s wealth, you have to learn to be individual and not just mass job workers, you have to get courage enough to know what you feel and not just all be yes or no men, but you have to really learn to express complication, go easy and if you can’t go easy go as easy as you can.

While redundantly clear as to the problem, Stein was less able (or willing) to offer a salutary prescriptive. Her vague concept of the “pioneering spirit” is open, apparently by design, to interpretation. Individualism, populism, staying tied to the land are all part of the equation. Curiously enough, although she saw these qualities as quintessentially American, the experience of France during the Occupation seems to have inspired her fervency. With the manufacturing process in collapse, the masses, particularly in the cities, suffered; those in the countryside, with small plots on which to grow basic essentials and raise a few chickens or goats, managed to endure the privation with far greater success.

By turning these immediate memories into object lessons, Stein hoped to convince Americans that a greater danger than international war awaited them back home. Her concern, as expressed through the mouths of GIs in Brewsie and Willie, was that the false prosperity that accompanied the war buildup would
quickly disintegrate, that economic depression would return, that "life on the installment plan" would cripple the individual's ability to think for himself, to act positively on his own behalf. "It's about that employee mentality we're all getting to have, we're just a lot of employees, obeying a boss, with no mind of our own and if it goes on where is America," says one of the characters in her book. For Stein, it was imperative that the people use their constitutional power to shape the future, to prevent what she saw as the imminent demise of a nation of "pioneers." In an eloquent discourse that mixed GI folksiness with a quotation from the Gettysburg Address, she attempted to rouse her readers to "look facts in the face, not just what they all say, the leaders, but every darn one of you so that a government by the people for the people shall not perish from the face of the earth."

Distrust of authority was always part of Stein's message, and her appeal. America's leaders in particular came in for a fair amount of abuse in Brewsie and Willie. Franklin Roosevelt is excoriated by name; non-office holders, governing through their corporations' influence over the political process, are collectively derided as well: "We are being ruled by tired middle-aged people, tired business men, the kind who need pin-ups," says one of her GIs.

It is this realization that is at the root of Stein's last great work, The Mother of Us All, written as a free-form libretto at the request of Virgil Thomson, who had received an opera commission from Columbia University. Stein chose Susan B. Anthony and her struggle for the right of women to vote as a vehicle to espouse her latest views on America.

According to Thomson, the subject was entirely of Stein's choosing. His original suggestion was simply that she provide him with a libretto "about nineteenth-century America, with perhaps the language of the senatorial orators quoted." She obliged, in her fashion; Daniel Webster is given a major role as Anthony's chief antagonist. His oratory, however, is inflated, pompous, chauvinistic, while hers is elegant, vibrant, eloquent, and human. Thomson was not displeased: "When [Stein] chose
Susan B. as her protagonist, I could not deny her the feminist approach. When she showed her in a scene of domesticity that might as well have been herself and Alice Toklas conversing about Gertrude’s career, I knew that she had got inside the theme and that the work would now be moving rapidly.”

The libretto did indeed progress quickly. Within months of Thomson’s initial offer, Stein had completed two key scenes and had developed the basic scenario, this despite the rather extensive amount of self-imposed research that she felt was necessary to do justice to the theme. She became so immersed in nineteenth-century American history that she exhausted not only her own collection on the subject but also that of the American Library in Paris. In the end, the library was forced to send to New York for additional volumes to satisfy her required reading list. From this reading she freely borrowed quotations, characters, and situations; at the same time, *The Mother of Us All* is hardly a historical drama in the classic sense. Friends and acquaintances, including Virgil Thomson, Jean Atlan, and GIs Donald Gallup and Joseph Barry are characters in the opera, as are figures such as John Adams who were no longer even alive at the time of Anthony’s struggle.

For Stein, Anthony embodied the true revolutionary spirit of America and her crusade must be set against other revolutionary historical events. Chief of these was the Civil War, which, while it resulted in the emancipation of the slaves and the enfranchisement of black men, did not give women the right to vote. Thus Anthony, in Stein’s view, is a fervent activist set on completing the revolution that should have taken place at the end of the Civil War, namely, the establishment of universal human rights. The struggle for the vote is symbolic; the real aim is that of creating equality between women and men, of toppling the masculine stranglehold on societal institutions in which “there is no humanity there are only laws.”

Powerful men, quite naturally, are the targets of Susan B.’s (and Stein’s) wrath. Her first denunciations have the quality of name-calling: “Men said Susan B. are so conservative, so selfish,
so boresome and said Susan B. they are so ugly, and said Susan B. they are gullible.” Later, however, frustrated in her struggle to get the men “to vote my laws,” she proffers a more profound and psychological analysis:

They fear women, they fear each other, they fear their neighbor, they fear other countries and then they hearten themselves in their fear by crowding together and following each other, and when they crowd together and follow each other they are brutes, like animals who stampede, and so they have written in the name male into the United States constitution, because they are afraid of black men because they are afraid of women, because they are afraid afraid. Men are afraid.

Marriage too is looked at with more than a shred of disdain. Susan B. proclaims: “I am not married and the reason why is that I have had to do what I have had to do, I have had to be what I have had to be, I could never be one of two I could never be two in one as married couples do and can, I am but one all one, one and all one, and so I have never been married to any one.” Despite Susan B.’s remarks on marriage, she has an extremely close and nurturing relationship with Anne, very much like Stein’s with Toklas. Anne, however, is clearly the follower, often literally echoing Susan B.’s statements. She is also Susan B.’s most ardent admirer, bolstering her, defending her, championing the cause. In short, she plays the supporting role; she is the woman behind the woman.

How Stein rationalized such a contradiction is not apparent, but it is evident that she did not see Susan B.’s union with Anne as a marriage in the conventional, and destructive, sense. Instead, she saw the two women as individuals united in a cause; Anne, in spite of her allegiance to Susan B., is not subservient, nor does she lack courage. She is every bit the fighter that Susan B. is. At times she even fuels Susan B.’s flagging energy, reaffirms the importance of the struggle. As such, her identity is not fused with that of Susan B.; she is her own person, a true comrade-in-arms.

_The Mother of Us All_ was completed a few months before Stein’s
death from stomach cancer. Whether or not she knew she was dying (Thomson thinks not), the closing scene is clearly a medit­ation on mortality. Susan B. is dead, and speaks from behind her marble-and-gold statue as her followers file past. It is a polemical ending, for on the surface she seems a disappointed heroine, uncertain of the victory gained since her death: "But do I want what we have got, has it not gone, what made it live, has it not gone because now it is had, in my long life in my long life." A closer reading, however, reveals that this statement is actually a call to continue the struggle in which gaining the right to vote was simply the first step. For Stein, as for Susan B., the real cause, not yet fully achieved, was that of self-determination, of overthrowing the established patriarchal order. As "Mother's" true child, Stein was bent on continuing that fight, knowing full well that, like Susan B., she was a "martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done."

By the time Stein finished The Mother of Us All in early 1946 her condition was becoming serious. Rejecting the advice of her doctor, who told her to consult a specialist, she continued as if nothing were wrong, even buying a new car. In July, after nearly two years of continuous living in Paris, Stein and Toklas decided to retreat to the countryside once more. The imprisoned Bernard Fay had offered them his house in Luceau. A few days after their arrival, while on an excursion to the nearby town of Azay-le-Rideau, Stein became seriously ill with intestinal trouble. She and Toklas took a room at an inn and a doctor was summoned. Upon examining her, he ordered her immediate return to Paris. The next morning Stein and Toklas left by train; an ambulance met them at the station and took Stein to the American Hospital in Neuilly. After a series of examinations, the specialists recommended surgery once Stein had regained some strength. On July 23 she wrote her will, leaving nearly everything to Toklas.

A couple of days later Stein was suddenly informed that the doctors had decided not to operate after all, as it was unlikely she
could survive the surgery. She, however, insisted that the doctors keep their word. According to Toklas, "Amongst the surgeons was one who said, I have told Miss Stein that I would perform the operation and you don't give your word of honor to a woman of her character and not keep it." On July 27 she was readied for surgery. "By this time," noted Toklas, "Gertrude Stein was in a sad state of indecision and worry. I sat next to her and she said to me early in the afternoon, What is the answer? I was silent. In that case, she said, what is the question? Then the whole afternoon was troubled, confused and very uncertain, and later in the afternoon they took her away on a wheeled stretcher to the operating room and I never saw her again."

RARELY HAS France had a foreign admirer as great as Gertrude Stein. From the beginning of her stay in 1903 until the end of her life in 1946, she continually championed France (versus the United States) as a place where creativity could flourish. In Paris France, published in 1940, she wrote: "Of course they all come to France a great many to paint pictures and naturally they could not do that at home, or write they could not do that at home either, they could be dentists at home because she knew all about that even before the war, Americans were a practical people and dentistry was practical." The legions of Americans who made their home in France in the twenties and thirties for the most part shared her view, as did those who, often following her advice and example, came after World War II. And while she "taught" Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Sherwood Anderson in the flesh, from beyond the grave she continued to exert an influence on a generation who never had the chance to have tea chez Stein.