

THE EPIC PRODUCTION OF GERTRUDE STEIN'S *THE MAKING OF AMERICANS*,
OR (RE)PRESENTING AND (RE)FORMING HISTORY

By

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For my Father, whose history of progress constituted mine

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Throughout this essay, I explore the modernization of the American family. But before jumping to my analysis, I would like to thank the communities—my families, blood or otherwise—that have shaped, constituted, and moved my own history and progress.

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The bulk of Gertrude Stein scholars have misappropriated her dictum regarding twentieth-century literature that “what is necessary now is not form but content.” But this literary-critical approach proves problematic: if we follow this prescription, we only succeed in reading a text in terms of what it is saying as opposed to how it is conveying meaning; and in that way, interpretation does not read the text as an object judged by its form so much as a subject with content reflective of its social moment. The solution to this reading strategy is not exclusively a matter of form or content; rather, the answer is a mediation of both form and content. For if we return to Stein’s quip and read the next line, the modernist further suggests, “Kindly learn everything please.” Thus, to learn everything about the content of a text, we must also learn everything about that text’s form.

This strategy proves useful for approaching Stein’s *The Making of Americans* precisely because most scholars overlook the form of the novel in order to negotiate its 925 pages of content; indeed, their analyses take for granted that the text is a novel, albeit a lengthy, difficult, and “monumental” one. Instead of merely glossing her text as “epic” or “an epic,” it is necessary to grapple with the formal implications of those generic allusions, where Stein’s modernist narrative recodes the epic form with modern content. Reading Stein’s novel as a modern epic is

a productive task because it challenges the interrelationship of individual and community; and with regard to the literary binary of form and content, elements of the epic, the novel, and myth are refigured and recast as a production of individual consciousness and cosmopolitan culture. On first glance, it seems as if Stein's attempt to reconstitute myth and epic as cultural functions provides a sense of cultural logic in which a nation and its citizens can start to recover from fragmentation. On second glance, however, it becomes apparent that American mythology does not lead to enlightenment regarding how the nation forms its citizens and how observable knowledge is rationalized as being embodied in an ideal citizenry. Instead, Stein's modernist project rewrites the modern form of epic and recasts the narrator as an epic hero, where discursive challenge and generic revision is neither a singular nor a deliberate action, but rather a reiterative practice that challenges classical narrative structures, idealized subjectivities, and traditional modes of interpretation.

In that context, *The Making of Americans* is as much a story of the writing process in which the narrator sets herself the creative task of composing distinctly American characters, as it is a history of the social mode of production in which nineteenth century America engaged in a national project of Americanization. Thus, "the making of Americans" is a narrative about the composition of the epic-novel's characters, the progress of the American middle class, the perceived cultural stagnation of that historico-philosophical moment, and the plot through which America positively collectivizes its citizens and negatively automates fragmented subjectivity. Stein's modernist project, therefore, recreates the way in which industry and economy affects the ways in which her characters experience modernization. And more, Stein writes a modern epic of Americanization where the progress of nationalism, cultural capital, and materialism require the allegorical sacrifice of the family and its ethnic origins.

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Now in that diagramming of the sentences of course there are articles and prepositions and as I say there are nouns but nouns as I say even by definition are completely not interesting, the same thing is true of adjectives. Adjectives are not really and truly interesting. In a way anybody can know always has known that, because after all adjectives effect nouns and as nouns are not really interesting the thing that effects a not too interesting thing is of necessity not interesting. In a way as I say anybody knows that because of course the first thing that anybody takes out of anybody's writing are the adjectives. You see of yourself how true it is that which I have just said.

Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*

To consider Gertrude Stein's critique of the interrelationship of textual meaning and grammatical semantics in relation to the literary analyses of her novel *The Making of Americans* is to discover that many of those critical readings either only partially adhere to or seemingly disregard her syntactic prescriptions. That is to say, in describing her 925-page narrative of a "history of a family's progress" in terms of its length and difficulty, her critics carefully mark the text adjectively as "epic" or nominally as "an epic" without interrogating what a generic classification might connote.¹ Such classifications of Stein's novel are interesting for two reasons: first, deliberate or not, her critics are following her grammatical prescriptions for both reading and analysis; and second, her critics are subscribing to her critical reading of both modernity as a historical moment and modernism as literary movement. Regarding both readings, Stein writes that "what is necessary now is not form but content" (*The Geographical History of America* 215). To be sure, writer and audience alike are reading *The Making of Americans* in terms of what the text is saying as opposed to how the text is conveying meaning;

¹ For example, among others, Barrett Watten describes the novel as "an identification of epic mastery" (96); Janet Malcom as "a heroic achievement of writing, a near-impossible feat of reading" (148); Michael Hoffman as "a mammoth book...not without direction" (40); Marianne DeKoven as a "heroic modernist [text]" (15); Franziska Gygax as "monumental...[covering] three generations of two (fictional) American families of the same ancestry" (13); and Barbara Will as a "massive 925-page epic" (48).

and in that way, interpretation does not read the text as an object judged by its form so much as a subject with content reflective of the social moment from which it springs. But as Fredric Jameson has taught us, it is impossible to distinguish between the form and content of a piece of literature. He cautions that if a literary critical approach reads a text as an “object considered in itself, the world taken as directly accessible content,” then that reading will result “in the illusions of simple empirical positivism or in an academic thinking which [will mistake] its own conceptual categories for solid parts and pieces of the real world itself” (*Marxism and Form* 56). And Jameson further notes that “exclusive refuge in the subject” creates a sense of subjective idealism that perpetuates “a kind of historical historicity, a mystique of anxiety, death, and individual destiny without any genuine content” (56).

The critical question, then, given retrospective authorial treatises, traditional critical conventions, and revisionary historicist interpretative strategies, is how are we supposed to read Stein and her text? The answer, it seems, is not exclusively a matter of form or content; rather, the answer is a mediation of both form and content.² For if we return to *The Geographical History of America* and read the line following Stein’s dictum privileging content over form, the modernist further suggests, “Kindly learn everything please” (215). Thus, to learn everything about the content of *The Making of Americans* we must also learn everything about the text’s form. And indeed, rethinking the bulk of her critics’ adjectival and nominal categorizations, the questions-and-answers become all the more intriguing when we consider the interrelationship of Stein’s “epic” content and form.

² This presupposes that there is in fact a question and an answer. Among her most infamous quips, Stein cheekily noted in *The Geographical History of America* that “so then is there in anything a question and answer. And what have master-pieces to do with this thing with their being no question to answer and no answer to question” (226).

Stein's epic impulse is a modernist one in which her narrative recodes the epic form with modern content. At the center of her "history of a family's progress"—as the subtitle of her novel implies—are questions of representation, subjectivity, history, and totality. The way in which her self-reflexive narrator attempts to negotiate her characters' individual "being" and "living" with collective familial and national belonging suggests that the narrator (if not Stein herself) projects a modernist agenda where a mythical and idealized past potentially revisions at once the increasingly disenchanted present and future social worlds: recounting the Hersland and Dehning family stories of "wandering over the new land, where they were seeking first, just to make a living, and then later, either to grow rich or to gain wisdom," the narrator tells a representative history of American origins, where each narrative fragment attempts to create a national consciousness of two families' genealogical progress (4). And Stein is in good company with her modern adaptation, where the individual becomes a sort of economy that negotiates individual and community contexts and where elements of the epic, the novel, and myth are refigured and recast as a production of individual consciousness and cosmopolitan culture. Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* envisions modernity as being marked by a process of continual disenchantment where a literary hero no longer represents a totalized social oneness (118). Similarly, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggest in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that because the dialectical structures of modern consciousness read the binary of internal and external nature as being dominated by a bourgeois status quo, the solution is to revision myth as "[constituting] the innermost paradox of epic" (60). Reconstituting myth and epic as cultural functions therefore provides a sense of cultural logic in which a nation and its citizens can start to recover from fragmentation.

But if the epic form of Stein's novel suggests the Frankfurt School's contrasting of myth and enlightenment where, as Robert Hullot-Kentor notes, "contemporary society is already the longed-for mythical world and any return to myth would only amount to immersion in another form of self-opaque enlightenment," American mythology would lead to enlightenment regarding how the nation forms its citizens and how observable knowledge is rationalized as being embodied in an ideal citizenry (106). More importantly, the balance of myth, history, and progress that the narrator is grappling with would indeed already be a historical fact and easier to recap. And clearly, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest and Stein's text reads, modern national mythology does not function like that. Instead, Stein rewrites the modern form of epic and recasts the narrator as an epic hero, where discursive challenge and generic revision is neither a singular nor a deliberate action, but rather a reiterative practice that challenges classical narrative structures, idealized subjectivities, and traditional modes of interpretation.

In that context, *The Making of Americans* is as much a story of the writing process in which the narrator sets herself the creative task of composing distinctly American characters, as it is a history of the social mode of production in which nineteenth century America engaged in a national project of Americanization. Thus, "the making of Americans" is a narrative about the composition of the epic-novel's characters, the progress of the American middle class, the perceived cultural stagnation of that historico-philosophical moment, and the plot through which America positively collectivizes its citizens and negatively automates fragmented subjectivity. Such a use of history, where narrative and social realities are imagined as interconnected, closely aligns Stein with her modernist counterparts; but generalizations regarding her modernist aesthetic must be qualified as her particular style blurs the distinction between text and world, where in her text the history of the Hersland and Dehning families is indeed the history of

America.³ This use of history is a distinctive representation of a particularly American experience where, as Jameson would suggest, “the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history” shapes the text (*Postmodernism* 307). Stein’s modernist project, therefore, consists of writing a story that characterizes the twentieth-century subjectivity of the third generation of Hersland and Dehning characters by writing the nineteenth-century history of the preceding two generations. And as the United States was more modernized than Europe (or specifically Germany in the case of her narrative) at the start of the twentieth-century, the text carefully recreates the way in which industry and economy affects the ways in which her characters experience modernization.

Given her overt class-consciousness, it seems that in *The Making of Americans* in particular, and I am tempted to say in Stein’s vision of American literature in general, the story of the middle class is the history of America. That seems an obvious enough suggestion since interspersed throughout the text are qualifications of “middle-class,” “bourgeois,” and the general language of materiality and production. To be more specific, though, the history represented in *The Making of Americans* is one of middle class production and consumption.

³ Stein’s approach to history in *The Making of Americans* is further differentiated from her high modernist counterparts as she directly (constructively albeit critically) writes a history of the American middle class. In his review of the novel, T.S. Eliot sneered, “There is something precisely ominous about Miss Stein. Her books of about one thousand pages may, and will, remain unread; but Miss Stein is going to make trouble for us just the same...Moreover, her work is not good for one’s mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is, as it is very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought to be interested” (595). Similarly, Wyndham Lewis in *Time and Western Man* suggested that Stein “became the people she wrote about, adopting their illiteracies and colloquialisms...[she] gives proof of all the false ‘revolutionary’ propagandist plainmanism of her time. The monstrous, desperate, soggy lengths of primitive mass-life, chopped off and presented to us as a never-ending prose-story are undoubtedly intended as an epic contribution to the present-mass democracy” (qtd. in Spahr 18). Or as Horkheimer and Adorno might respond to Stein’s critics, “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression” (28).

Stein herself notes that “history is the state of confusion between anybody doing anything and anything happening” (*The Geographical History of America* 133). And if we read that treatise on history in line with Benjamin DeMott’s notion of the American “myth of classlessness” where personal freedom and self-fashioning become conflated with ideals of citizenship and nationalism, Stein’s project becomes all the more relevant (43-44). Indeed, the “history of a family’s progress” is both a narrative about middle-class Americanization and a critique of the superstructure that commodifies an American bourgeois consciousness. Moreover, Stein’s text reflects a phenomenon that Robert Seguin would describe as the “middle class” effectively becoming synonymous with “classlessness” precisely because Stein’s narrator and her story demonstrate “an ideological-practical inhabitation of the world wherein class has become putatively superseded, or at least temporarily suspended” (2). For the Hersland and Dehning families, to become “middle class” is less a choice of lifestyle and more the only way of life.

What we see if we read the form and content of the novel dialectically are the ways in which Stein recodes epic conventions to critique modernity’s impulse to collectivize and totalize; or in the case of her particularly American historiography, the epic form of her novel critiques the historical moment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States when social, political, and intellectual movements attempted to collectivize a positivistic categorization of American “being” and “living” and to produce, manage, and profit from that “mass” bourgeois subjectivity. Early in the novel, Stein relates the problem of individual identity formation to the collective influence of the opposition between familial and national communities. On one level, Stein is referring to Americanization narratives in which immigrants were forcibly encouraged to abandon their “old” culture with a modern American counterpart. Here, the “making of Americans” becomes a point of anxiety regarding citizenship, where

pundits, politicians, and immigrants alike were torn between a restrictive call for cultural homogeneity and a relativist doctrine of cultural pluralism.⁴ Bound up in this cultural narrative are questions regarding the role of family: to what extent are “family units” expected to assimilate to the norms of the “American family”; and to what extent—as Priscilla Wald importantly observes—are immigrant families forced to forget their particular family story so as to meld with the traditional white middle-class family? (246)

At the same time, though, the opposition between family and nation in subject formation directly calls into question thematic issues regarding form. To recode her novel as a modern epic—and indeed Americanization as an epic process—Stein must also interrogate the cultural narratives that at once produce historiography and make Americans, namely “myth” and “progress.” On first glance, the function of this thematic opposition seems a conventional modernist reading of modernity: “myth” seems to construct a “family” narrative characterized by elements of nostalgia, prehistory, and the primitive, while “progress” seems to construct a “national” narrative dominated by industry, history, and the modern. On second glance, however, especially if we consider Horkheimer and Adorno’s maxim that “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology,” Stein challenges the ideology that privileges that first reading of the progress-myth opposition (xviii). The significance of this move is that Stein is engaging in her own “dialectic of enlightenment”: precisely because her family narrative calls into question the anxiety of Americanization and the way in which both manual and intellectual labor have removed any historical consciousness beyond empiricism and positivism, she suggests that “progress” would require a cultural return to (or at least an engagement with) history, myth, and nature.

⁴ For a more detailed synopsis of the problem of immigration and Americanization, see Priscilla Wald’s “A ‘Losing-Self Sense’” in *Constituting Americans* (243-251).

To read the form and content of *The Making of Americans* dialectically, then, is to grasp Stein's critique of realism via a modernist return to epic form; recoding the language and content of the epic tradition is a response to her modern moment's historical fragmentation and the cultural regression of the American national project. It is to read the epic ideology of form as reproducing an outmoded mechanical reality of the middle class in literature, as challenging the corporatization of modern American life, and as challenging traditional strategies of narrative production and consumption. But before we can engage in a critical rereading of Stein's revisionary stance on the American middle class, we must look at the way in which the form provides a narrative space to address that cultural content; we must in fact examine the way in which the epic form allows Stein to decode her historical moment and recode modern national mythology by—to borrow Susan Hegeman's phrasing—“[holding] the past and present, and center and periphery, in dialectical tension” (24).

To begin, Stein blurs the generic strains of the epic and novel, as well as the function of the hero in each. In her text, there is a resonance of Lukács' dialectical vision of the novel where the interior opposes the exterior, the individual opposes the community, and the psychological opposes the historico-philosophical. He writes, “The novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventure in order to be proved and tested by them, and by proving itself, to find its own essence” (89). And it is quite clear that Stein's narrator fits Lukács' description of the hero of the novel: to write her American historiography—the action which prompts her interiority—she must first come to terms with her families as subjects, her nationalism as theme, and the genealogy as plot—the content that prompts her introspection.

However, Stein's narrator also reflects aspects of a Lukácsian epic hero whose passivity "[fills and embellishes her life as] the form taken by the objective and extensive totality of the world; [she herself] is the luminous centre around which this unfolded totality revolves, the inwardly most immobile point of the world's rhythmic movement" (89). Regarding the epic hero, Lukács continues, "[Her] unquestioning, concentrated interiority forces [her] to translate that interiority—which [she] considers to be the average, everyday nature of the real-world—into actions" (90). As an epic-but-ordinary American trying to write a version of her national history, the narrator acts as an everywoman character who uses her perceptions, ideas, and experiences to shape her narrative. So while she is not an epic hero who proves "incapable of contemplation" or "possibility of inward-turned activity," the narrator is an epic hero whose interior world is inseparable from her outside world, and vice versa.

What this play with interiority suggests is that a narrative of American history is both novelistic and epic, in that an introspective individual can act as a national representative and as a hero who is valued both for the balance of her ideas and action. As Stein notes in *Lectures in America*, the function of the writer and the modern hero is to individually and subjectively "discover the things the things to see the thing to look at" so that she can representatively and objectively "find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names" (235). And this fusion proves true in *The Making of Americans*: the narrator's impulse—and Stein's overarching intention—is to make sense of modernity by writing a brief history of American families' immigration and assimilation experiences; but in order to do so, she must prove her mettle by composing a definition of American "being" and "living" and then articulate that definition in her narrative. As the narrator herself notes, to make sense of her authorial task requires "learning, knowing and telling" her characters because "there has been much writing of

listening to repeating, of hearing, feeling, seeing, knowing all repeating, of feeling knowing each one sometime as a whole one, now then there is a little writing of the telling of the knowing always in me” (328).

The success of Stein’s revisionary approach to both national mythology and family history, therefore, rests in the figuring of her narrator as a hero of a modern epic who is at once a singular, self-reflective subject and a representative self-reflexive citizen. For Stein, rethinking Americanization becomes a feminine task because a woman’s language is automatically culturally constructed and socially constituted as “Other.”⁵ Because she is a woman writer attempting write a family history that challenges the dominant discourses of nation and narrative, her problems of subjectivity, citizenship, and artistry are figured in her insider-outsider status. Space in this instance becomes multiply figured: the narrator must address the space of her own subjectivity, the space of her characters as textual subjects and types, the space of her marginalization within modern discourses, and the space of her anti-language which appropriates and sublimates hegemonic linguistic codes. This is why Stein begins *The Making of Americans* with what is essentially a space-clearing gesture. The narrator begins her family history with an anecdote that posits progress as tension between generational continuity and succession: “Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. ‘Stop!’ cried the groaning old man at last, ‘Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree’” (3). Stein is clearly playing with the modern myth of subjectivation in which capitalist America presupposes that children will equal (if not better) their parents in culture, class, and intellect. Indeed, the

⁵ This notion itself resonates with Stein’s self-fashioning and self-marketing of herself as a modern writer. Indeed, as she visions herself as “genius” precisely because of her figure as a woman writer, regardless of whether or not she subscribes to normative gender roles. Stein contends in *The Geographical History of America* that literary masterpieces in her epoch are produced by women, precisely because they are situated in a place of under-privileged subjectivity (215).

anecdote seems to suggest that Americanization still places a formative value on the role of the family in individuation. And the narrator justifies this sort of family socialization as constitutive of and necessary for family history and national progress: “We need only realize our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves, and our history is complete” (3). That is why the narrator initially feels compelled to consider America both homogeneously as a cohesive nation and heterogeneously as a family-like community of individuals.

But such a reading of the opening anecdote and its reading of the family as a modern space of social reproduction seems overly naïve in the modern age of capitalism. Although the family unit would still be a space of subjectivation in the cultural logic of nineteenth-century American industry, it would more than likely be only one social space that, along with community, market, and nation among others, influences individuation. I want to suggest, perhaps somewhat perversely, that underlying the narrator’s opening anecdote is the unconscious opposition between “family” and “nation” in the cultural narrative of “history” and “progress.” For immediately following the anecdote, Stein teases out a contradiction in her narrator’s privileging of the family. Rationalizing family nostalgia, the narrator notes that the “tempers we are born with”—both our inherited and developed dispositions—“[die] away” with experience (3). What the narrator seems to be suggesting is that with age and experience one can develop into an adult comfortable in one’s self-image and cognizant of the forces that have influenced one’s subjectivity. But if American history is based on family lineage, it is also possible to read the “death of experience” as a demythologizing of the family, where the material community—the nation—replaces the preexisting community—the family. In Stein’s revision of the modern epic, therefore, the narrator’s focus on the family unconsciously acts as an overcompensation, where the privileging of genealogy is an attempt to counter the way in which modernity reads

progress as a shift from family to nation; and as a consequence of that movement, that process, that progress, the American family itself becomes expendable.

Indeed, as the narrative develops and as the narrator further elaborates on the process of collectivization that contradiction materializes; her conception of community becomes almost exclusively national. The influence of family—when addressed—acts most often as a mark of difference or a modern break with tradition rather than a mark of collectivizing nation-building. For example, at the start of her history, the narrator either problematizes a family identification that fosters a sense of “the old world not altogether lost” or uses the family unit as a marker of Americanization so that a more assimilated family like the Herslands “had not had their money any longer than the others in [their] community, but they had taken to culture and ideas quicker” (17; 22). Put another way, the nation as a form of family becomes privileged in her mind so that the family unit becomes sublimated to the greater discourse of the American family. Despite her function as a cultural arbiter—in both the narrative and real worlds—one of the narrator’s first rhetorical moves is to exclude; her gesture towards totalization is itself marked by a type of closure.

Seemingly unaware of what her categorization has foreclosed in terms of community, the narrator thinks that in order to write about Americans she must consider the many kinds of people who “make America”; or more simply, the narrator must “type” American “living and “being.” She seems optimistic that she will both be able to locate variations of independent and dependent being in her characters and that she will be able to adequately negotiate the nuances of each character’s self-reflexive interior-exterior consciousness.⁶ The narrator suggests that “vital

⁶ To be exact, in the novel Stein classifies two types of personalities—“independent dependent” and “dependent independent”—possible for Americans: “There are always some of then the many millions of this first kind in them the independent kind of them who never have it

singularity”—a kind of interiority that must be (and is not yet) bred by “custom, passion, and a feel for mother earth”—is only possible when Americans can potentially balance their subjectivity as individuals and citizens (21). She notes

Yes real singularity we have not made enough of yet so that any other one can really know it. I say vital singularity is as yet an unknown product with us, we who in our habits, dress-suit cases, clothes and hats and ways of thinking, walking, making money, talking, having simple lines in decorating, in ways of reforming, all with a metallic clicking like the type-writing which is our only way of thinking, our way of educating, our way of learning, all always the same way of doing, all the way down as far as there is any way down inside to us. We are all the same all through us, we never have it to be free inside us. No brother singulars, it is sad here for us, there is no place in an adolescent world for anything eccentric like us, machine making does not turn out queer things like us, they can never make a world to let us be free each one inside us. (47)

According to the narrator, therefore, “vital singularity” is necessarily a product of American modernity. The space of the nation, the space of the family, and the space of the text allow for the possibility of some combination of coherence or totalization where, as the quoted passage suggests, Americans can strike a balance between the interiorized characteristics of individuality, eccentricity, freedom, and queerness and the exteriorized characteristics of citizenship, conformity, and mechanization.

But “vital singularity,” it is important to note, remains only a possibility. What is immediately striking about this process of subject formation is the way in which consciousness is assembled: the abstract, qualitative language of identity is paired with the concrete, quantitative language of industry. It seems as if the narrator is conflating the production of citizens in

in them to have any such attacking in them...Some of them have this in them as gently pretty young innocence inside them...In the second kind of them the dependent independent kind of them who have too all through their living servant girl nature in them, in this kind of them there are many of them who have a sacred timid submission in them with a resisting somewhere in them...” (177). For the sake of brevity (and because I think the terms are, for all intents and purposes, collapsible into the first adjective), I’ve chosen to use “independent” and “dependent.” For a summary of these attributes, see Norman Weinstein, *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness* (32-34).

America with goods in the workplace. Indeed, the narrator's description of "vital singularity" smacks of Taylorism, where the collectivization of manual and intellectual labor privileges "machine making" and "making money" as America's only "way of thinking," "way of educating," and "way of learning." What's more, "vital singularity" remains only a possibility precisely because of this focus on industry and capital; in the history of national development, America's modernism is based exclusively on its industrialism, and "vital singularity" as the narrator describes it requires characteristics beyond the economic.⁷

So while it is possible to read "singularity" as something that Americans can potentially transcend, where the distinction between interior and exterior is not absolutely (and perhaps not even normatively) defined, the trait can also be read as something coded as entirely typical. In reading this passage, Barbara Will observes that neither the narrator nor her audience appear to be "Americans" or "queer things." Instead, she suggests that they can be both. She writes that the narrator's type-casting breaks the conformity-singularity binary: as conformists, "Americans can be said to exemplify type, to embody typicality," where their routine lifestyles make them mechanistically generic and reproducible; and as singular subjects, Americans as "vitaly singular" can be figured as a "product," but one that is "not yet within the capacity of American manufacturing to 'make' but potentially a viable American good" (112). Significantly, when we read "singularity" dialectically, we are forced to recognize that the characters that have this trait can be read as mass-produced and/or self-reflective individuals.

The critical question now becomes, to what extent does the narrator limit the transgressive power of her casting as Stein's modern epic hero if she herself negotiates the same

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the "imaginative context" of American modernity, see Susan Hegeman's chapter, "Modernism, Anthropology and Culture" in *Patterns for America* (20-27).

sort of inner/outer, conformity/singularity complexes that she types her characters with? And more, what does such an implication in the American system of mechanized production do to her act of artistic (re)production?

At the start of the novel, the narrator does not seem overly concerned with the way in which her “typing,” her analyses of the characters’ identity traits, and her repetitive narrative style seem to feed the American machine of “singularity” reproduction. In fact, in an address to her readers, she notes that the story that she is telling is “not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversations to amuse you, but a record of a decent family progress” (34). Carefully crafted with respect to the style of her narrative and meticulously composed with respect to the details of each family saga, she implies that what differentiates her work from the other texts is precisely that her story is about “these many kinds of decent ordinary people” (34). The fact that her story is a middle class typology is less a problem of writing a history of conventional American characters than a narrative innovation that uses genealogical conventions and historical traditions to codify American progress. The narrator even goes so far as to bring her readers into the characterological mix with the invocation, “and so listen while I tell you about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please, this history of this decent family’s progress” (34). As the hero of Stein’s modern epic, the narrator invokes “us”—assumed American readers, and more, assumed middle class readers—to recognize our shared history and similar experience with American middle class tradition, ordinary family control, and traditional heterogeneous family stories.⁸ With a Lukácsian move of epic proportions, she consciously and

⁸ Indeed, Wald notes that Stein imagined that “white middle-class readers [were] presumed to be the largest audience for the Great American Novel” (241).

self-reflexively tries to position her self-perception of “vital singularity as an interiorized subjectivity that translates to her characters’ and readers’ exteriorized reality.”⁹

Towards the middle of the novel, however, the narrator seems to have a change of heart, or at the very least the beginnings of a coming-to-consciousness. In a section following her description of “vital singularity” she reflects,

Every one always is repeating the whole of them. Always, one having loving repeating to getting completed understanding must have in them an open feeling, a sense of all the slightest variations in repeating, must never lose themselves so in the solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation. If they get deadened by the steady pounding of repeating they will not learn from each one even though each one is always repeating the whole of them they will not learn the completed history of them, they will not know the being really in them. (294)

Whereas at the start of the novel, the narrator naively defended her compulsion to defend her reading of “singularity” as being the mark of individual, familial, and national progress, now she questions the way in which heterogeneous “being” repeated in her characters does not always lead to a cohesive, homogeneous national identity. As Melanie Taylor notes, in the narrator’s search for a self-professed “completed understanding,” she begins to recognize that “repeating is something that represents the sameness in ‘every one,’ but it is also the key to the difference that is in ‘each one’” (30). Therefore, the narrator’s original intention of writing an American history through the typing of nation, family, and individuals in “the ordinary kind of families, histories” and in a “simple middle class monotonous tradition” must be rethought because each repetition of convention leads to a difference of type that in turn leads to a revision of standpoint.

⁹ Lukács writes, epic interiority “is always reflexive, it realizes itself in a conscious, distanced way in contrast the naïve distancelessness of true lyricism...Reflexion and mood are constitutive structural elements of the novel form, but their formal significance is determined precisely by the fact that the regulative system of ideas on which the whole reality is based can manifest itself in them and is give form through their mediation; in other words, by the fact that they have a positive, although problematical and paradoxical relationship to the outside world” (114).

To be a “singular” subject is contingent upon a proactive engagement with the personality’s “bottom nature,” or psychological core. The narrator realizes the potential problems of this characteristic when her strategic repetition of “bottom nature” characteristics in her individual characters and across generations raises both similarities and differences and more questions than answers. For example, she notes that one “type” of person can shift their emotional temperament in terms of their own self-perception exclusive of how others perceive them: “There are some men and women having in them very much weakness as the bottom in them and watery anxious feeling, and sometimes nervous anxious feeling then in them and sometimes stubborn feeling in them” (456). So while an individual’s “bottom nature” might be psychologically consistent with the groups he or she interacts with (family, for example) and therefore observable as one part in a whole, a single individual’s “bottom nature” read alone cannot produce a substantive analysis of his or “type” or a quantifiable perception of his or her reality. Norman Weinstein points out that in the text “what changes is not the fact that men perceive reality but what they choose to single out in their perception of reality” (34). Or put another way, the narrator’s sense of both American history and her ordinary family history are composed of the gradual shifts in her characters’ national and narrative perceptions, which are in turn highly subjective, imperceptible perspectives.

Because she recognizes that her impulse to write a history based on the progressive formation of “vital singularity” across generations is becoming increasingly problematic, the narrator begins to question her ethos as a writer, both in terms of her ability to write her family history and her ability to inject her own voice. She reflects, “Categories that once to some one had real meaning can later to that same one be all empty. It is queer that words that meant something in our thinking and feeling later come to have in them in us not at all any meaning”

(440). The narrator recognizes not only that her repetition of character types leads to difference of perception at that moment of iteration, but that it also leads to a loss of meaning. Taylor suggests that the text's circularity "perhaps reflects an authorial acknowledgement of the 'deadening' effect on readers (and writers) of language use that conveys only limited meaning in any conventional sense" (30). Indeed, as a producer of epic revision, the narrator is dabbling with character traits as "types" and "conventions" that can be read "typical" and "conventional." And for this reason, when considering her treatment of American epic space, it is legitimate to read the narrator's formula of "typing" as providing more ambiguity than meaning and raising more questions than conclusive answers.

In a final heroic gesture, the narrator tries to justify her aesthetic impulse towards repeating the "being in men and women" so that she can understand each character's "singular" progress and consciousness development. She notes that although "it seems absolutely impossible those ones should be believing and often it is altogether puzzling and more and more in living if any one is listening to other one's thinking and believing," that her repetition really provides a more nuanced sense of what each character "is borne of" or is sensitive to at that particular moment of description (483). But interestingly, at the end of that very same page, the narrator abandons her self-preserving and text-affirming mission and complains:

Disillusionment in living is finding that no one can really ever be agreeing with you completely in anything. Disillusionment then in living that gives to very many then melancholy feeling, some despairing feeling, some resignation, some fairly cheerful beginning and some a forgetting and continuing and some a dreary trickling weeping some violent attacking and some a letting themselves do anything, that, as is very certain, not, those fighting beside you or living completely with you or anybody, really, can really be believing anything completely that you are believing. (483)

For the narrator, disillusionment is more and more a feeling endemic to modernity. Because American "living" evolves throughout the three generations so that "being an old man or an old woman is being no longer a young one no longer a young man or a young woman no longer a

growing older young man or growing older young woman,” the older generations of Hersland and Dehning characters become disillusioned because their “being” is radically different than (and incomprehensible to) their younger family members (483). Because singularity is a subjective trait that can not be objectively observed, the narrator becomes disillusioned with the progress of her narrative. And because her story seems to shy away from allowing her readers textual mastery, she becomes disillusioned that her readers will not read her characters’ “bottom natures” or her historical analysis in the same way she reads (and writes) them.

Considering these examples of disaffection together, she worriedly rambles, “I mean, I mean and that is not what I mean, I mean that not any one is saying what they are meaning, I mean that I am feeling something, I mean that I mean something...I mean, I mean, I know what I mean” (782). The problem is that she means many things at many times to many different people. Indeed, it is productive to read the narrator as flailing precisely because she cannot strike a textual balance in which she can approach her text as both object and subject. Revisiting Jameson’s treatment of objectivity and subjectivity in a piece of literature, the narrator seems to flounder with regard to both: focusing on “typing” and “vital singularity,” the narrator tries to empirically force objective conceptual categories on unclassifiable abstract subjectivity; and conversely, in attempting to subjectivate those categories of consciousness, the narrator only succeeds in creating a sense of historicity that merely perpetuates the modernist clichés of anxiety, fragmentation, contingency, and individualism. It’s as if she has run the gamut of modernist mythology—forcing a historical periodization that rejects the “old” culture, rejecting the classical mythology of the past for the present materiality of language in the present, and trying to privilege the production of Americanization—and stumbles over the temporality of individual identity.

Ultimately, the space of “vital singularity” becomes problematic because she fails to properly recognize that American subjectivity is contingent upon both “space” and “time.” The narrator’s revisionary historical strategy, where she uses repetition in an attempt to tease out cogent and contiguous “bottom natures” from (and for) her characters, requires that she subordinate her narrative space to nonlinear time. Consistently (re)presenting and repeating her characters’ consciousness “types” and psychological traits allows her to rethink history in such a way that her narrative of family initially conceived has little need for memory.¹⁰ But what this narrative choice requires is a focus on the present—on the immediate task of “making Americans” in the text and in the twentieth century. Indeed, this focus on the present is why progress must be gauged in terms of “nation” and not “family”: the dominant question in America in this historical moment is not necessarily of origins but of status. Thus, family history and the anamnesis of “living” and “being” for the narrative’s first two generations of Herslands and Dehnings is in effect marginalized.

Precisely this narrative play correlates with what Lukács would term the “epic quality” of memory, where the “past either does not exist or is completely present” (126). In reading Stein through Lukács, we must note that his epic “[knows] nothing of the passage of time” and “[allows for] no qualitative difference between the experiencing of past and present” so that “time has no power of transformation” (126). Time alters nothing in the epic because the inner and outer worlds of the hero are homogeneous. Returning to *The Making of Americans*, the

¹⁰ Discussing Stein’s approach to history, Dana Cairns Watson notes that family histories are not standard historical plots “developed through contextualization, summary, analysis, and the needs of the nation,” so conventional genealogies become “events told through the haze of personal memory and the lens of egoistic bias” (26). On the linearity of these narratives, she notes that “history is not arranged chronologically, and events are rarely attached to a date. If personal experience is linked to national events or social movements, this linking is done loosely and inaccurately” (26).

problem with the narrator's approach is that she is trying to write a history in which the interiority and exteriority of her characters' "singularity" can represent a developing sense of American consciousness where the youngest generation can be compared to the oldest. And that kind of history cannot be exclusively written in the present tense precisely because to write a "history" of American "progress" is to negotiate both spatial and temporal elements.

In narrating her epic family saga, the narrator cannot transcend her modern historico-philosophical moment to create a cohesive national subjectivity or a totalized national history because her repetitive stylistics forcibly analyze consciousness and construct a concealed totality of life. Considering her writing process and composition with Lukács as a lens, the narrator's epic impulse to create totality through looking at the interiority of her characters is betrayed by the weight of her language and of her content. Discovering that subjectivity cannot be totalized and that meaning in life cannot be determined, her revision of history remains traditional and indeed normative. Instead of being a genealogy that really interrogates the role of the American middle class and the emergence of bourgeois culture which defines her historical moment, the narrator's history of "progress" becomes one of "death" where language loses its transformative power and it is impossible to be "singular" and "completely succeeding in living" (*The Making of Americans* 896). Or more specifically, it becomes a story where the narrator discovers the most blatant "vital singularity" in her youngest male character, David, who dies before he can do anything especially "vital" or "singular."

As a producer of revisionary history, the narrator as epic hero fails. But that is not to say that the narrator as epic hero fails as a product of Stein's revisionary history. To make such a distinction, we must remember two things regarding Stein's intention for writing *The Making of Americans*: it was first to revision the epic tradition from a modern American perspective, and

second to rewrite American history as a modern epic in order to counter the national, family, and literary structures that hegemonically compose it. And regardless of the success or failure of her narrator, these exegeses still hold true. The narrator is a tool that allows Stein to provide her take on what makes (modern) American history; and she is the authorial perspective that allows Stein to question the legitimacy of the bourgeois, nationalist, Americanist discourses and institutions and to problematize the counter-narratives that potentially offer revisionary solutions.

For the simple fact that Stein used her narrator to challenge conventional modernist thinking and her family storytelling as an oppositional strategy does not mean that Stein was proffering either function as a viable solution; rather, it means that Stein was aware of the problems regarding American historical consciousness and that she attempted to represent those problems—and the struggle towards solution—in her novel. Henry Sayre suggests that in Stein's later work it is the structure of representation and not what is being represented that interests her. He argues that because Stein "concentrated on the presentation of language as a thing," her work "attacks the valorization of the individual psyche which sees its artistic productions as manifestations of its own spirit or soul—and in this she takes on the masculinist definition of individual creative production and undermines it, establishing once and for all the centrality of her work to the contemporary feminist project" (30). But I would not limit this narrative strategy to the texts that she published later in her career. Instead, I would suggest, based on Stein's use of her narrator in *The Making of Americans*, that Sayre's periodization of Stein's narrative strategy be expanded to consider her earlier works and to include her 1925 American epic. After all, Stein's epic revision is contingent upon the meta-narrative representation of the narrator, where the materialization of her perspective meets the materiality of Stein's language.

So what do Stein's forcing of repetition, her subordination of textual space to narrative time, her double-voiced narration, and her narrative performativity mean with regard to her modern revision of *The Making of Americans* as epic novel and her narrator as epical hero? First, we must remember that Stein is playing with the space of American subjectivity in order to problematize the American impulse to totalize historical progress and the individuals involved with such movement. She absolutely critiques the impulse of individuals to reductively envision a coherent self as balancing a homogenous national identity with a heterogeneous self-consciousness. Next, and more importantly, we must recognize that Stein is critiquing writers like her narrator who assume that they are challenging patriarchal institutions in their texts and with their texts but who fail to realize the way in which their counter-narratives are actually products of those hegemonic discourses. Or as Rita Felski would suggest, in her re-vision of history, Stein is challenging modernity's polemic that to be "modern" requires "the repudiation of the past and a commitment to change and the values of the future" (*Gender and Genre* 13). And the cultural disillusionment of her narrator precisely because she fails in this exercise is proof of this.

At this point, it would be useful to look at Lukács a final time in relation to how Stein's dialectical approach to form and content tries to broach subject formation with modern national mythology. Lukács notes that in certain epic forms resembling the novel, memory is a creative and transformative force and that that kind of memory is reflective of life processes. To surmount the duality of interior and exterior worlds—the binary of individual subjectivity and national belonging—he writes, the subject must "glimpse the organic unity of his life through the process by which his living present has grown from the stream of his past life dammed up within his memory" (127). If this task is achieved—if an individual, a writer, or a text can successfully

“master” and “integrate” subject and object—then that experience will become an “authentically epic form” (127).

What this means in terms of a modern aesthetic praxis is that writing in modernity requires that subjectivity and history be negotiated. And for Stein in particular, such a negotiation is necessitated by a writing practice where the “self” becomes a sort of economy that negotiates individual and community contexts and where elements of the epic, the novel, and myth are refigured and recast as a production of individual consciousness and cosmopolitan culture. In fact, in *Lectures in America* she reiterates that this formulation was precisely the exegesis for her epic composition of *The Making of Americans*: “I had done something that was not leading to anything because after all you should not lose two things in order to have one thing because in doing so you make writing just that much less varied” (224). Breaking down this artist’s statement into its component parts, there seem to be three competing ideas: that Stein had done something, that her “something” accomplished nothing, and that balance and variation compose the best sorts of writing. Looking at her novel as a revisionary epic, her narrator as an epic hero, and her narrator’s performativity as a meta-narrative of failed cultural critique, we have thoroughly addressed the first and third components. However, the second—the idea that her text accomplished nothing—has been completely overlooked. That her “something”—which we could rightfully read as her reformulation of genre, her writing of the text, her characterization of her narrator, or the effect of her transgressive themes—achieved nothing seems impossible both because as readers we are trained to find some sort of meaning, resolution, or call to action in a text and because we would hope that after laboring over a 925-page novel that purports to chart historical progress that we would be able to see the effects of that identity development. But

challenging our impulse towards textual mastery, Stein would note that as readers we are expecting too much.

In “Composition as Explanation,” she suggests that there is a difference between writer and reader with regard to the material difference produced by a variation of a text’s words and syntax:

There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it. (21)

Because her subtitle is “Being a History of Family Progress,” because her narrator dwells upon subjectivity and “vital singularity,” and because her narrator grapples with the subplot of a modern writer to generate cohesive meaning, as readers we expect that Stein’s epic novel will be enough of a conventional narrative to give us at least a glimpse of whatever revisionary perspective the novelist, the novel, and the narrator initially seem to promise. But Stein’s take on meaning is wholly different; or rather, her take on meaning is wholly difference. Her own personal reading and writing process is what Ulla Dydo calls, “a scrutiny of herself in relation to her ongoing perceptions and formulations—the writer in the act of writing” (21). So if we approach the text in the same way that Stein might, we will find (at least two) different readings. First, *The Making of Americans* is a liminal space where Gertrude as author and Gertrude as meta-narrator could challenge the politics of the nation, of the family, and of the literary establishment; more specifically, it is the space where she could challenge the mythology of American history, of family historiography, and of modern literature. And second, it is also a liminal space in which modernity makes the implementation of Stein’s and her narrator’s

revisionary strategies impossible; more specifically, it is the space of failed potentiality where narrative experimentation cannot rewrite national reform.

What this ultimately suggests about Stein's revisionary approach to nation, family, and language is that meaning is at once a product and performance of meaning. And what this means for Stein's play-filled experiment with "family" and "nation" and "myth" and "progress" is that her text can neither be written nor read within the conventional binary of success/failure. In fact, Stein seems to be suggesting that that binary is a moot point since the process of making Americans does not pair family-nation and myth-progress as dialectical opposites so much as historical moments in which the pre-modern former is subsumed by the modern latter. Americanization, therefore, is an event and not a process. This is a critical distinction in Stein's aesthetic philosophy; in *The Geographical History of America*, she writes: "Events are connected with human nature but they are not connected with the human mind and therefore all the writing that has to do with events has to be written over, but the writing that has to do with writing does not have to be written again, again is in this sense the same as over" (108). Indeed, the "making of Americans" as an event is an impossible task precisely because the narrator subscribes to the modernist ideologies of self-consciousness and dehistoricization. It corresponds to the narrator's attempt to psychologize and type the Hersland and Dehning family members: what is more important to the narrator is the way in which her characters are "being" and "living" rather than interrogating the reasons why (and how) they are influenced to act; what is more important is categorizing her subjects as objects rather than analyzing the way in which her work is perpetuating the national mythology that effectively confuses her historical project.

But perhaps this is the point. It is the instability of meaning, the irresolvable conclusion, the refusal to force cohesion that transcends these normative reading strategies and allows Stein

to create a new “space” for composition and comprehension. As Catherine Stimpson suggests, the radical and disruptive potential of experimental writing functions in such a way that “to destabilize is not to eradicate; to dislodge is not to demolish” (11). To read *The Making of Americans* as a modern American epic is to read the narrative as a text of symbolic (in)action. It requires us to recognize that Stein is replicating the logic of capitalism via its reification—in the figure of the narrator and her approach to history—so that she might counter it. Where her narrator suggests that the “making” of Americans requires a present participle, focalizing the writing of the narrative as an event with no past or future, Stein suggests that the “making” of Americans is a way of thinking with no beginning, middle, or end. But while both readings seemingly suggest that there is no “ending” to the way in which the Herslands and Dehnings engage in a process of “becoming” Americans, Stein’s is markedly different because she refuses the totality and closure that the narrator’s focus on the subjective, the present, and the “new” values seems to require. Instead, Stein’s revision of the narrator’s foci centers on the way they affect both history as the work and the history of the work. Regarding both, Stein emphasizes that production of history necessitates a negotiation of the way in which mythologies of the past, experiences of the present, and expectations of the future form the text; or, whereas the narrator finds total meaning in the present, Stein suggests that one reading of time renders the work of history as fragmentary.¹¹ Indeed, the writing process—from composition, to revision, to

¹¹ The root of this application comes from Fredric Jameson’s reading of Adorno in *Late Marxism: Adorno or Persistence of the Dialectic*. He problematizes the notion of historicity, historiography, and truth in writing, “the historical situation of each one is an absolute present—a present of struggle, praxis, suffering—whose claims on reality are sapped by any chronological historicism or relativism of the archive. A political aesthetic also wishes to affirm this primacy of the present and the event; but it is clear that for Adorno it also means lining the monads up on sides and in teams, and substituting general demands of style and discussions about art in general for engagement with the works themselves” (224). And he later concludes his discussion on the “Productivities of the Monad” by explicitly suggesting that “political thinking lies in the form

audience—requires a range of temporality and perhaps even temporization. Therefore, Stein’s refusal to subscribe to the generic conventions, instead writing her epic-novel as a mediation of form, is a refusal to subscribe to modernity’s axiom of “being,” or at the very least its attempt to codify it. For her, the problematic of content—as she has demonstrated over and over again in the narrative—is that meaning is artificial, language material, and knowledge performative. The solution, it seems, to the problem of modern identity is to read form.

So to end, perhaps we should return to the statement of purpose with which Stein as writer starts her novel and the narrator as teller starts her story: “The old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old, that is the story I mean to tell, for that is what really is and what I really know” (3). We have already established that neither the writer nor her narrator “really know[s]” anything; or rather, Stein suggests that both know many things at many times. So if her vision of modern epic means avoiding the artificiality of meaning and replacing it with the performativity of language, then “the old people,” “the new world,” “the new people,” and “the story” also become performative restatements. Obviously the people correspond to her characters and the world to their families or genealogies. But perhaps based on reiterations, repetition, and rereading it is possible for the readers of her text to be (re)made out of their own world with each reading. And if that is indeed the case, to revision the epic, to rewrite American history, and to rethink subjectivity, she implicates her readers in the process of transcoding. Therefore, “the making of Americans” requires a performative reader. It is only in our process of reading and rereading that the promise of “a history of progress” is possible.

rather than the content of his thoughts, which, conceptualizing aesthetic form of philosophical content rather than politics as such, is capable of detecting within them—with a starker, more luminous articulation than can normally be achieved within political analysis or social history—the complex mobilities of the historical dialectic” (225).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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